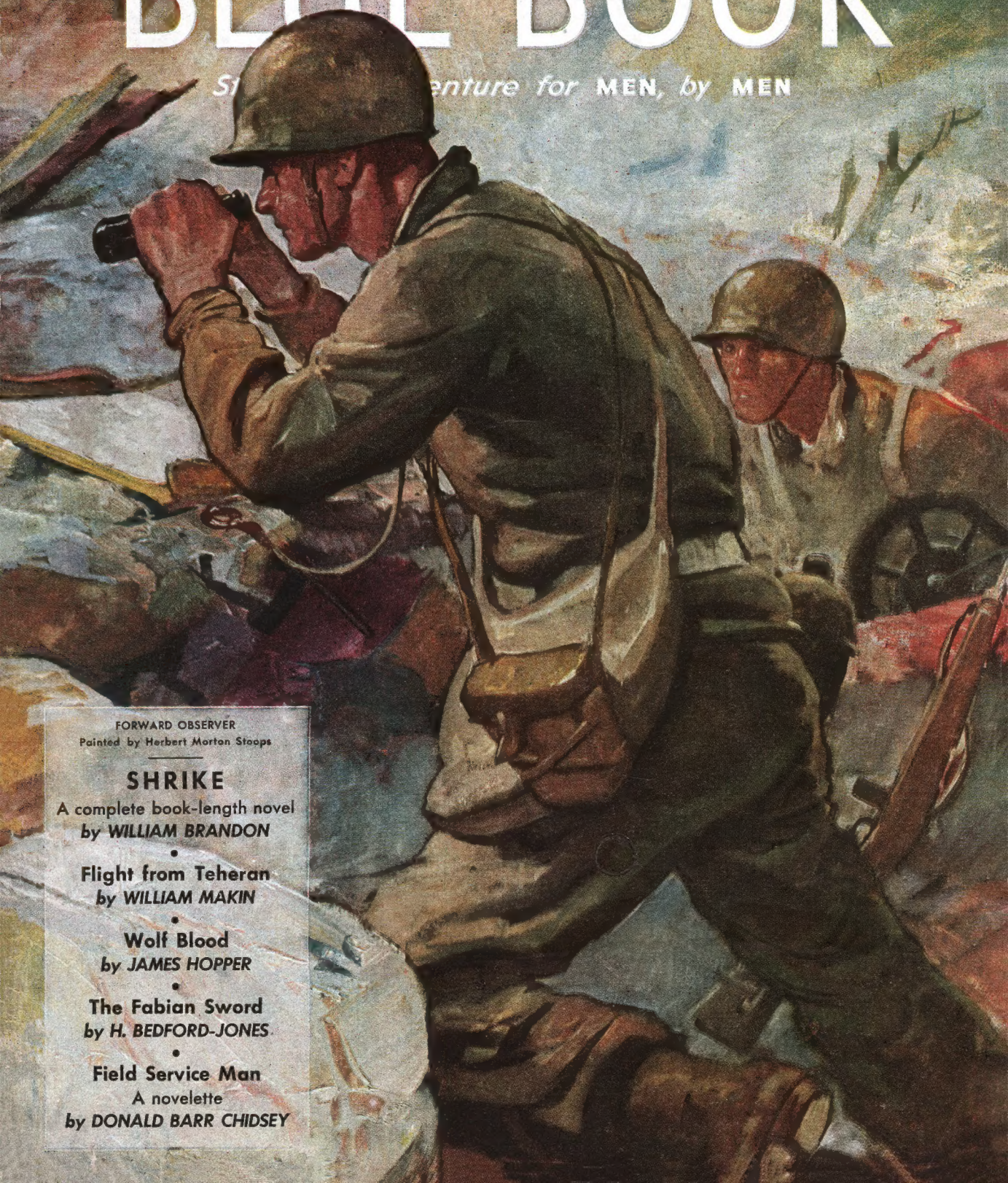


AUGUST

25 CENTS

BLUE BOOK

Story and Adventure for MEN, by MEN



FORWARD OBSERVER

Painted by Herbert Morton Swoops

SHRIKE

A complete book-length novel
by WILLIAM BRANDON

•
Flight from Teheran
by WILLIAM MAKIN

•
Wolf Blood
by JAMES HOPPER

•
The Fabian Sword
by H. BEDFORD-JONES

•
Field Service Man
A novelette
by DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Who's Who in this Issue

James Hopper

HE was born in Paris, son of a French mother and an Irish father. Came to the United States at the age of eleven, settling in the then small town of Oakland, California, where he went through the public schools.

Then through the University of California, quarterback on the football team, bow oar on the crew, member of the rifle team, and editor of the college weekly, this strategic position enabling him to print some of his first stories.

During the confused period following graduation with formidable degree of Bachelor of Philosophy, worked as reporter on San Francisco papers, as sub-editor on the San Francisco Weekly *Wave* (with John O'Hara Cosgrave and Will Irwin), coached the University of Nevada football team (coming down to beat the Yost-coached Stanford team), coached the University of California football team (getting licked) taught French for six months at the University of California, got married, then went to the Philippines for two years, founding schools for its Department of Education. Upon his return, became father of a baby daughter (first of a line of four children) and began to appear professionally in the big magazines.

He's a fanatic adherent to the short story, falling only twice in his career, once to write "Nine-Thousand-and-Nine," a prison-life novel with Frederick R. Becholdt; a second time to write (all alone) "The Trimming of Goosie," a fantastic tale with a winged hero.

In the First World War was in France as correspondent for four years, and is mad as hell because they won't let him get into this one. He went over the top at Cantigny (First War), narrowly escaped taking forty German prisoners (they were quite insistent) and came back with a wounded American boy, carrying one-half (the heavier half, he's always thought since) of the stretcher.

Edmund Ware

BORN in Plantsville, Connecticut, 1900; educated at various prep schools, including Loomis, Huntington, Detroit University School; Harvard, Boston University, and Antioch College.

Reporter on Boston *American*; worked as sandhog, cowhand, guide, packer in White Mountains.

Managing Editor of National Sportsman and Hunting & Fishing magazines for ten years. During this period did exhibition fly- and bait-casting unwillingly, and traveled—willingly—to remote parts of Canada on hunting and fishing assignments in collaboration between the magazines and the C.N.R. and C.P.R. railroads—Hudson's Bay, British Columbia including Vancouver Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia. One of the co-inventors of Skeet, now used as basic training for aerial gunnery. Vice president National Skeet Shooting Association till 1935. Author of many technical articles on ballistics shooting instruction, fishing and tackle, canoeing.

Outside the sporting field, stories appeared in Saturday Evening Post, Red book, Reader's Digest, Good Housekeeping, Collier's, American, Esquire, etc.

"Who Travels Alone" was written in the Maine cabin five miles by canoe from where the story's action takes place. In the last twenty-five years, the author has run the river of the story over forty times, and its rapids and trout pools are as familiar to him as the path from his cabin to the lake. For many years he has been a non-resident, licensed Maine guide.

Kenneth Gilbert

KENNETH GILBERT was born in Wisconsin while lumbermen were still kings along the river, and the annual log-harvest and spring "drives" down freshet-swollen streams were parts of the colorful picture. In more recent years he has lived in the State of Washington, another great forest region, making his home on an estate in the Cascade foothills. He is the author of many outdoor stories which have appeared in magazines, and also three books.

Mr. Gilbert is a member of the American Society of Mammalogists and the American Ornithological Union, and has devoted most of his life to a study of natural history, much of it at first-hand. His fine story "Wild Samaritan" begins on page 82.



BLUE BOOK

August, 1944

MAGAZINE

Vol. 79, No. 4

A Complete Book-Length Novel

Shrike

Cover page by John Fulton

By William Brandon 105

Ten Short Stories

The Two Legacies

Illustrated by Charles Hargens

By Frank Bonham 2

The Fabian Sword

Illustrated by Maurice Bower

By H. Bedford-Jones 12

A Lady Swings Her Right

Illustrated by John Fulton

By Joel Reeve 20

Flight from Teheran

Illustrated by Cleveland Woodward

By William Makin 30

Who Travels Alone

Illustrated by Edward Shenton

By Edmund Ware 40

You'll Get Nowhere by Quitting

Illustrated by Manning de F. Lee

By Gordon Keyne 46

Lost Interview

By Captain Richard G. Hubler 52

Wolf Blood

Illustrated by John Costigan

By James Hopper 53

A Strong, Willing Man

Illustrated by John Fulton

By Achmed Abdullah 76

Wild Samaritan

Illustrated by John Costigan

By Kenneth Gilbert 82

A Novelette

Field Service Man

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

By Donald Barr Chidsey 88

Special Features

What Do You Think?

28

My Most Amusing Experience

44

A Warrior Goes Home

A Twice-told Tale from our September, 1932, issue

By Meigs Frost 58

Blue Book's Crossword Puzzle

Edited by Albert Morehead 59

Forward Observer

By Edwin V. Westrate 61

Selections from the New Books

(Copyright, 1944, by Edwin V. Westrate. Excerpts reprinted by permission of and special arrangement with E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.)

Cover Design

Painted by Herbert Morton Stoops

Except for articles and stories of Real Experience, all stories and novels printed herein are fiction and are intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or to actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.

DONALD KENNICOTT, Editor

McCALL CORPORATION, Publishers, The Blue Book Magazine

William B. Warner, President
Marvin Pierce, Vice-President
Francis Hutter, Secretary
Phillips Wyman, Vice-President
J. D. Hartman, Treasurer

Published monthly at McCall St., Dayton 1, Ohio. Subscription Offices—Dayton 1, Ohio. Editorial and Executive Offices—230 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE, August, 1944, LXXIX, No. 4. Copyright, 1944, by McCall Corporation. All rights reserved in the United States, Great Britain and in all countries participating in the Pan American Copyright Convention and the International Copyright Union. Reprinting not permitted except by special authorization. Subscription Prices: one year \$2.50, two years \$4.00. Extra in Canada, 50 cents per year; foreign \$1.00 per year. For change of address give us four weeks' notice and send old address as well as new. Special Notice to Writers and Artists: Manuscripts and art material submitted for publication in the Blue Book Magazine will be received only on the understanding that the publisher and editors shall not be responsible for loss or injury thereto while such manuscripts or art material are in the publisher's possession or in transit. Printed in U.S.A.

Entered as second-class matter, November 12, 1930, at the Post Office at Dayton, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1897

READERS' COMMENT*

NEARER TO HIM

Please don't kick me out until I've had my say. I know BLUE BOOK is written for men by men, and I'm only a woman (and a good cigar is a smoke). But it so happens that even a woman gets fed up on this bloodless love-stuff the women's magazines publish and likes a dose of good red-blooded reading she can sink her teeth into.

My husband's abroad (whose isn't?), and BLUE BOOK is a real comfort. It makes me feel nearer to him, somehow, to read stories about fellows who act and think as he does and even go through some of the same things.

Mrs. Robert Sloat.

A UNIQUE ROLE

Anent a reader's suggestion that you run articles of opinion on current issues, and your request for comment.

Let us hope you will not depart from your slogan: "Stories of Adventure for Men, by Men." Articles on controversial subjects are a dime a dozen. Newspapers and other periodicals are full of them, including syndicated columns and what-not, most of them dull or plain dishwater. One would think any reader could get his belly full of such tripe without asking you to waste valuable space.

BLUE BOOK fills a unique rôle in the publishing field. Through a mysterious lapse of observation, I did not discover the magazine until last autumn. However, while in the southeast Washington desert, at work on a huge defense project, I found it—eminently worth-while.

For instance, one could not afford to miss Beam's "Unconquered American," April issue. To me, a humble amateur naturalist (or ecologist), that is prime stuff—a rare understanding of one of our wildlings. Let us have more nature tales or articles.

As a whole, your editorial choice of material (in my rating) is excellent, but I could do without the detective-mystery feature.

Your war material and reprints are splendid. More power to you.

J. E. Fuller.

*The Editors of BLUE BOOK are glad to receive letters of constructive criticism and suggestions; and for the ones we publish each month we will pay the writers ten dollars each.

Letters should not be longer than two hundred words; no letters can be returned; and all will become property of McCall Corporation. Address: Editor of Letters, Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Ave., New York 17, New York.

LEGACIES

by Frank Bonham

houses; I planted me vineyards. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."

Will felt his face grow hot. He stood there awkwardly with his big work-roughened hands hanging. Will was dark-skinned and big-boned, like his brother, but with a lean toughness that came from the range.

"That's part of my legacy to you," Andy Sargent said. "The most important part. Will sat on the ranch. I've had Zack Culley draw everything up tight. I want no wrangling after I'm gone."

He lay there for a time with his eyes closed. Then he said: "I want to sleep now."

ANDY SARGENT did not come out of that sleep. In the morning he was dead.

After the funeral Will and Ed went with Zack Culley to his office above Howard's Mercantile, on the elder-shaded street. Will sat on a hard chair, feeling stiff and clumsy in a new black suit. He was a man who loved hard work, and the friendly old clothes and smelly leather that went with it. Ed Sargent had bought a new suit too, with quilted blucher boots and a pearl-gray Stetson to match. He looked more like a politician than a mourner, Will thought.

Zack Culley explained the intent of the will. He had been Andy Sargent's lawyer for twenty years, and times when nobody in the family was speaking, he acted as go-between. "It seemed best not to split up the ranch," he said. "Most of all, your father didn't want you scrapping over water and range. You know how he hated wrangling."

"We know how he hated to be crossed," Ed said.

Will said: "Ed!"

"Okay, kid," Ed said. "He's buried, with all his cussedness, and so is everything. And now I've got a little business to talk." Ed got up and lit a cigar, and stood for a moment looking down into the street. It was a cherooot, and it smelled to Will like pipe-heel. Ed was five years older than Will, though in his heart he would never be as old. He loved a good time, and he didn't compare prices when he went out to play. "How'd you like to buy my half of the ranch, kid?" he said.

Will said: "What?"

"I'm no rancher," Ed said. "I'm going to see what else the world's got to offer. Besides, the only way we'll keep from wrangling is if one of us owns the whole kit and caboodle. You're the logical one. You've got the cash, and you could make a profit on five head of goats in Death Valley. Make me an offer."

Will smoked his cigarette. He remembered the early days on the Oxbow, when Indian raids were not uncommon, and he and Ed had had to work cattle as soon as they were big enough to ride. Those days had been hungry and pitiless. Andy Sargent believed the way to make a hard man was to leech all the softness out of him as a boy. Will had been rebellious all the way, but Ed just kept his mouth shut and lay in the shade when Andy was not looking; and in the end it was Will who was the hard one, and Ed who spent life prodigally like money easily come by.

And now the ranch where Will had been little more than a hired hand was being laid in his lap. He had three thousand dollars saved, the result of taking his wages in calves each fall, and raising a little stock of his own.

Will said: "Twenty-five hundred."

Ed said to the lawyer: "Write it up."

When it was all finished, the check in Ed's hand, Will asked: "What do you intend to do?"

"Two things," Ed said. "First I'm going to propose to Nan Kearny. If she'll have me, I'm buying two tickets to California. If she won't, I'll buy one. Good luck, kid! Don't forget to build you houses and plant you vineyards." They heard him laughing as he went down the stairs.

Will was surprised, when, that same night, he saw Ed get on the stage by himself. Why would any woman refuse Ed, even a girl like Nan, who was a beauty in her own right, and heir to one of the biggest ranches in the county? But Will Sargent was glad. Sometimes, when it came to lovemaking, he wished he were a little more like Ed.

The next time he saw Nan, she was angry. Her mother had been French and her father Irish, and that combination makes for temper.

"Will Sargent," she said, "I used to think you were square, if you were close. I've changed my mind." Her chin was a stubborn little ball.

"I suppose you mean about Ed," Will said. "Well, he wanted to sell. I gave him a fair price."

"And how long will that last Ed? He'll come home broke some day, no better off than any drifting cowboy."

Will said again: "He wanted to sell. I didn't make him." It was not his funeral if Ed preferred drifting to being anchored, and it angered him that Nan could not understand that.

Will Sargent banked a big profit that year. He had always seen a lot of places where his father could cut corners, and now he put them into effect on the Oxbow. Salt-blocks no longer lay all over the rugged mountain range like tombstones: The *Breeders' Gazette* said a cow required twelve and one-half pounds of salt a year, and that was what they got.

But he spent money too. By fencing in his summer range, he was able to let one of the punchers go. He bought three Hereford bulls at two-fifty apiece. He had new corrals built and whitewashed the adobe buildings, not for show but because it was economy in the long run.

And he seldom thought of the other half of Andy Sargent's legacy, that read: "*—and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit.*" The only time his spirit was vexed was when he thought of Nan, as he sat by the sheet-metal stove on winter nights.

The following year was his big year. After the fall shipping he put everything above actual operating expenses into blooded stock. He put up two windmills on Cripple Creek. At the weaning roundup, he saw that he would have to have at least fifteen men for the spring tally, and six steadies after that. And in April, Ed came home.

ED never knocked at a door in his life: he was that sure of his welcome. He stood in the doorway that night while Will squinted over the lamp at him, and then he came in laughing.

"Uenas tardes, kid!" he said. "What have we got to eat?"

Ed was handsomer than ever, but all the bronze was gone out of his face. He was thinner, with some lines about his eyes and mouth. He wore a brown pin-striped suit, and wine-colored boots.

Will took him into the kitchen. "Two years," he said, "and not a post-card."

Ed poured his coffee. "Nothing ever happened to write about. I did some copper-mining; no dice. Same for running a jerk-line freight outfit. Also for some other enterprises you wouldn't approve of." He poured half the contents of the sugar bowl in his coffee. "Engaged to Nan yet?"

Will laughed. "When Nan gets engaged, it will be to Tom Bell."

"The unlucky Sargents," said Ed. "Both of us in love with Nan, and a mail-order cowboy like Tom Bell wins her. I'll bet he's planted him more vineyards by now than you."

"He's ranching a little," Will admitted. "The best barns in Mesquite, and the worst cattle."

Ed ate hungrily. He said with his mouth full: "By the way, kid—I'm broke."

Will had been waiting for this. In a sense, he admired Ed Sargent; whatever he did, he made no excuses for

Will buckled on his Colt and went over to the Red Front. . . . Men in the saloon were watching him.

himself. Ed interrupted his search for an answer.

"Well, are you going to ask me to stay?"

Will said: "Do I have to ask you, Ed? Your room's still there."

Ed was watching him now. "No, but I mean to work—as a puncher. I tell you, Will, the old man was right. I saw a lot of country, and I kissed some pretty girls, and now I'm ready to slow down."

"And now you're broke," Will said. He thought of the twenty-five hundred dollars, and all the things Ed could have done with it.

Ed looked at his hands, which were white but just as big and thick-fingered as ever, and then up at Will. "I'm never broke as long as I've got these. They've dealt cards and handled a rope and spoiled a few people's looks. And I'm still on top. Do you want me, Will, or don't you?"

"It's like this," Will said. "What are people going to say if I keep my own brother on as a forty-a-month puncher? And yet we'd never hit it off on any other basis."

"All right," Ed said. "I can go to work anywhere. I only asked because I thought it might not look so good to people if I wasn't working here."



Ed finished his dinner. He smoked one of his rum-soaked cigars, and then went to his old room. Will sat there for a while. He did not feel smug about Ed; rather, he felt a little guilty. But if he hadn't bought Ed out, someone else would have, and then there'd have been hell to pay. Ed had his proportions all wrong. Money was too big a factor to be left out of a man's calculations.

IN May, each year, Mesquite let its spurs out to the town notch for the annual rodeo. For the ordinary punchers it was a time of festival; for those who were trying to run a ranch, it was strictly business. The week before the show was filled with buying equipment for the summer and fall, and signing on extra hands.

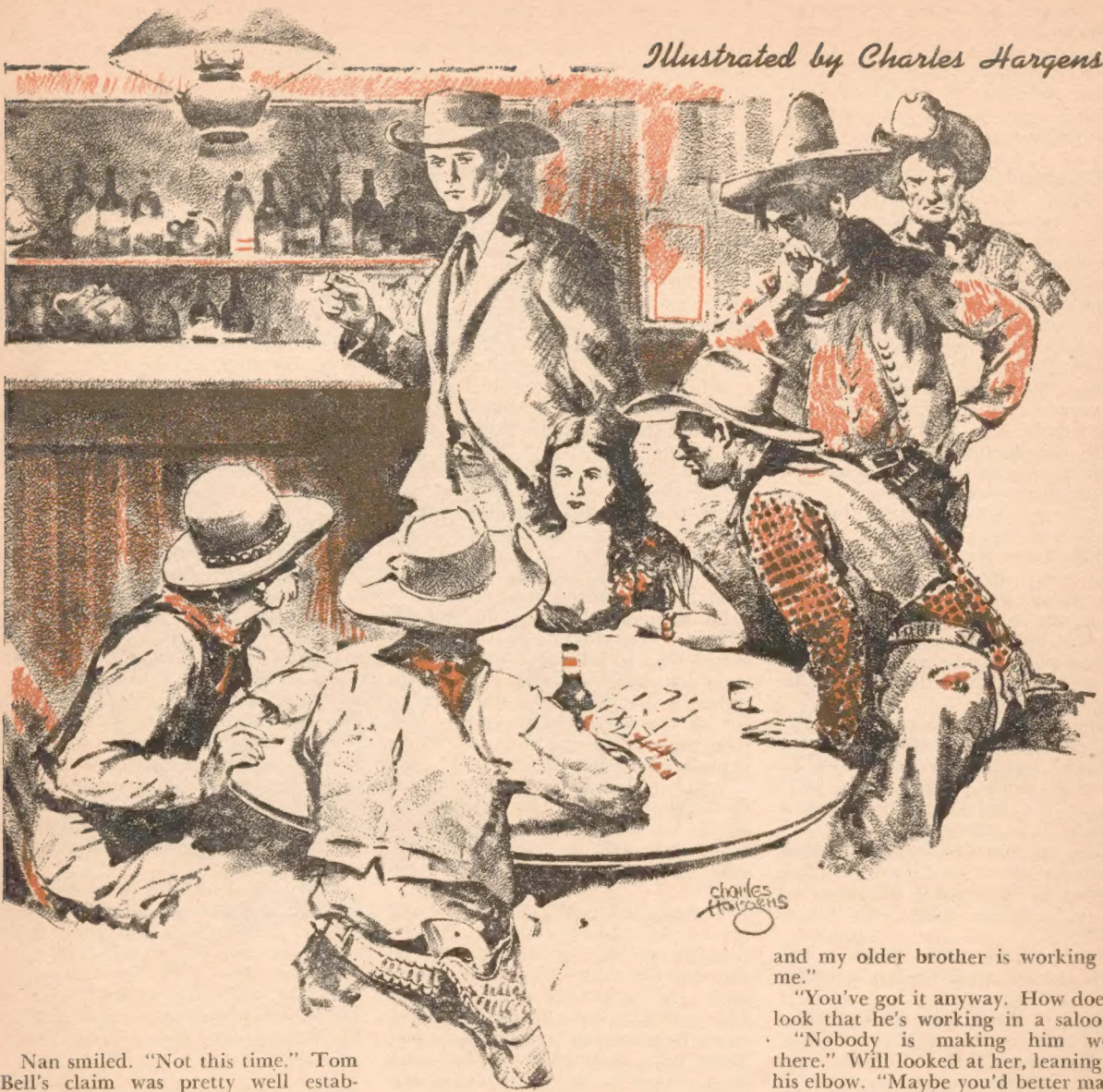
Will Sargent got a Mexican to stay at the ranch, and took his whole crew to town. The punchers stopped at the Red Front, but Will went on down to the bank. He said to Bob Horton: "I want a thousand transferred to my commercial account."

The rest of the morning he spent at the feed-store and at Howard's Mercantile. As he left the store, Frank Howard said: "By the way, Will—Nan Kearny was looking for you. She said she'd be at the hotel till noon."

Nan was on the gallery of the Colonial when Will rode up. She waved to him and came out to the hitch-rack. She was wearing a tan riding skirt and a red silk shirt for the rodeo, but she didn't need the red for color; warmth was something Nan was born with.

"I've made some sandwiches, Will," she said. "I thought we might have a picnic down the creek."

Will said: "Fine. Tom Bell going along?"



Nan smiled. "Not this time." Tom Bell's claim was pretty well established; he had a more or less standing date with her for all the entertainments that came along.

They rode a mile down Poverty Creek. All the cottonwoods were in new leaf, and the willows were fragrant. The stream rushed along with a thousand little voices, and overhead the New Mexico sky was as blue as a glass bead.

All of this beauty of rebirth went into Will Sargent with a pang of loneliness, somehow sharpened by Nan's presence. It was not good for him to be with her: always she left him conscious of the imperfections, the lack, in his life.

They found a place where a cottonwood shaded a sharp elbow of the river. They ate the thick sandwiches, watching the water flash and tumble.

Nan said: "I was right about Ed."
Will said: "Well, what did you expect of him?"

"It's too bad, anyway." Nan frowned. "And I don't like him working for Billy Galt."

"Galt!" Will said. "I thought he was working on some ranch."

"He's running a roulette game. It couldn't be in a more or less decent place like the Buckhorn. It had to be in Billy Galt's Red Front." Nan looked at him. "Will, why isn't he working for you?"

THOSE abrupt questions of hers put him on the defensive, though he had his answers. "Now, how would that look?" he countered. "Two years after Dad dies, I've got the whole iron

and my older brother is working for me."

"You've got it anyway. How does it look that he's working in a saloon?" "Nobody is making him work there." Will looked at her, leaning on his elbow. "Maybe you'd better marry Ed and reform him."

"Maybe I'll have to," Nan said. After a moment she said: "I didn't mean to get started on that. What I really wanted to see you about was that forest lease of yours. Dad wants to buy it from you."

Will smiled. "Just like that?"

"We've got to get more range," Nan said. "Dad's stock is behind the times. With the buyers it's all short-horn, now, and they won't graze on cactus like sensible cattle. We've got to have shorthorns and some place to put them."

Will frowned. He had more range than he needed since he had gone over to Herefords. He was running only half as many cattle as he had been two years ago, but they were worth three times as much. But he would

need that extra space for the stock he intended to buy.

"I might sublet for two years," he said. "I'll need the land later."

Nan watched the creek. "That wouldn't help. In two years we'd be right back where we are now."

NEAR sundown Will left her at the hotel. He had dinner, and at eight o'clock walked down to the Red Front. Inside were enough noise and smoke and smells for three saloons. A bar spanned the north wall, and the trash-littered floor was given over to tables and a clearing for dancing. Billy Galt provided the girls. Will could smell their cheap perfume through the tobacco smoke. At the piano sat a man in shirt-sleeves who pounded the keys as though he were trying to beat someone to death. Beneath clusters of lamps on a balcony the gambling was going on.

Ed Sargent was operating the roulette wheel. His coat was off, and he wore the black sleeve-protectors and a green visor which gave his face a sickly color. Will placed a silver dollar on the double-zero and watched Ed's face. Ed's eyes were on the board.

"The play's made, gents," he said, and sent the ball skittering over the frets.

The wheel came to rest. "Double-zero, gents," Ed said. He raked in the bets, and stopped suddenly when he saw Will's dollar. "Well, damn me!" he said. He paid Will and signaled a house man to take his place.

They sat down at an empty table. Ed lit a cigar. "That's just to teach you not to bet against this place. I can work it the other way just as well."

Will shook his head. "What in hell are you doing, working in a hole like this?"

"Well, I thought of teaching in a young ladies' seminary," Ed said, "but I'm shy around girls."

Will said curtly: "You've got to get out of here. You're no better than any other tinhorn when you're running a crooked game."

"I'm the Robin Hood of roulette," Ed said. "I rob the rich and pay the poor."

"With all the ranches there are in this country—"

"Did I ever show you my scar, kid?" Ed interrupted. He rolled up his sleeve and exhibited an ugly bluish trough in his forearm. "I told you the old man was right. That's what taught me. It was the other guy who was crooked, but he shot first when I called him. For a while I won't be much good with a rope."

"My God!" Will said. "And you let me turn you away—"

Ed shook his head. "I wouldn't have taken a job with you anyway.

I'd only have been a pensioner. Only, I wanted to see if you'd learned as much as I have." He shook his head. "You haven't."

Will started to get up. Ed said: "Wait a minute. I was going to look you up if you didn't come in, anyway. I'm in a jam, Will."

When he used his name, Will knew he was serious. He waited.

Ed took a deep breath. "Have you got two thousand dollars?"

Will said: "Now, what?"

"I can't tell you a thing," Ed told him, "except that the family name might be a little soiled if I don't find the money. Make it a regular loan. I'll pay you back in installments."

Will was suddenly sorry he had ever bought Ed's share of the ranch. Maybe he could have kept him around until the wildness worked out. But the time for that was gone: Ed had his foot on the wrong trail, and not all the money in the world would drag him back, if his own strength of character could not.

He said: "I'm sorry, Ed. If I thought it would do any good—"

Ed Sargent stood up, his mouth white. "You wouldn't untie your money-bags to save your own mother from hanging!" he said. "You'll go right on like you have, until you've got all the money in Mesquite. And then you won't know any more about being a man than you do now!"

Will hit him. Ed went back against the balcony railing. His lip began to bleed. He shook his head and wiped his mouth, and he stood there. He said: "I'm sorry, Will. I had it coming."

Will wanted to say: "*No, Ed. I was the one who had it coming.*" But he couldn't say it; he watched Ed go through the tables to a door in the back. He went down to the bar and had a drink. But he could not silence the voice that kept saying he had grown hard, as Andy Sargent had been hard. Hard in a way that was not admirable.

But when he examined the picture, he felt he could justify anything he had ever done. He dealt fairly with all men, and if he were not weak in the ways that many men were weak, it was because he knew a man could go from the top to the bottom in a hurry. The only thing he was sorry for was that he had hit Ed.

Before Will left, he looked up Billy Galt. Galt was short and fat, with black eyes and black handlebar mustaches. He had more money invested in gold teeth than most men had in the bank. He wore celluloid collars that he could wash with an eraser, and combed his thin black hair across his head to hide the bald spots. Galt affected red neckties as a sort of trademark.

When he saw Will, he said: "What's a-matter, Will—you boycotting me? You haven't been in in a year."

Will said bluntly: "I go places where they don't water the whisky. Give Ed a message for me. Tell him I'll have the money in the morning."

Will had intended withdrawing the money in the morning, but as he went by the bank a few minutes later, he saw Bob Horton working over his books in the back. Horton let him in.

Will said: "Let me have two thousand, Bob."

Horton said: "That's going to run you kind of low." He was a big fleshy, fair-skinned man who always seemed to be worrying, and he had the dark-circled eyes and pulled-down mouth of a dyspeptic.

"I'll leave me enough to get through till fall," Will said.

Horton made some marks on a pad of paper. Suddenly he said: "What would you say if I told you I haven't got it?"

Once Will Sargent had been kicked in the stomach by a colt. He felt the same way now—shocked and cold. "I'd say you were either joking or crazy," he said.

Horton said: "Well, I'm not either—and I don't have it." Then he shrugged, nervously. "I don't mean I've embezzled. Hell! It's all right here—in loans. I let my soft heart get the best of me last fall. Now I've got all you boys coming in wanting money, and it's out. Most of the notes aren't due till fall. But at the rate it's going, you're going to break me—and yourselves."

Will looked into his pale eyes, that were not quite steady. Horton looked away. "Aren't there laws about how much you can have out?" Will said.

Horton was slow in answering. "Yes," he said. "But a banker's got to use some common sense, or he'll have his best accounts going broke during off-seasons."

WILL frowned at the pages of the ledger, with its columns of hair-line figures. Paper money! A man worked hard all his life and turned his savings over to a bank, which gave him a little book with some figures written in it. Then the bank loaned his money out. If something happened that the bank failed, all the man's years of toil were dust, and he was worth just what his pass-book was worth as old paper. There was something to be said for the old barter system, at that.

Will said: "Let me see your account book, Bob."

The banker said testily: "I'm not bankrupt yet."

"You will be if I spread this around. You'll be in Santa Fe, too. You've got forty-five hundred dollars of mine,

and I'm interested to see where it's gone."

Horton growled and brought a gray ledger from the safe. Will went through it methodically. He found proof of something he had always suspected: That Tom Bell and Bob Horton were very good friends indeed. Tom Bell owed the bank seven thousand dollars. That explained how he lived so high on a ranch no larger than Will's, with a minimum of intelligent ranching. Billy Galt's fingers were in the pie for fifty-four hundred. The other loans were all of a few hundred dollars, except John Kearny's, who owed two thousand, and Kearny was good for it.

There was the sound of a man coming up the steps, and Will and the banker saw Tom Bell come into the doorway and stand there in surprise. Bell said, "Well, well!" and came inside, a red-headed, robust man wearing a white hat and a brown business suit. Tom Bell glanced at the open ledgers and then quickly at Horton, his flat features alarmed.

But he said casually: "I saw the light, and wondered if anything was wrong."

"Quite a bit's wrong," Will said. "I think maybe you and Billy Galt are going to sell out."

Bell laughed and pulled up a chair. He was a great one for show, but behind the flash was a cool, tough temperament not easily shaken. His face was too wide and flat, but with a certain hard handsomeness.

"What's the matter, Bob?" he said. "Won't the books balance?"

"Not until certain unsecured notes are called in," Will Sargent said.

"What are you trying to do?" Horton complained. "Build up a case? Tom's Drag Seven ranch is behind that seven thousand."

"Six thousand in barns and corals," Will said, "and a thousand in scrub cattle. But the land is worth something. And to protect your depositors, you're going to call in the loan, Horton, and sell it at auction. The same with Galt's Red Front, if he can't raise the money. It's either that, or we're all broke and you go to the pen."

Tom Bell crossed his legs. "Who made you a stockholder?"

"My forty-five hundred dollars." He got up and put on his flat-crowned Stetson. "It might be a good idea if the bank didn't open tomorrow, because of Chinese New Year or something, to prevent a run getting started. You'll be closed the next three days for the rodeo. That will give you time to raise the money."

Bell watched him go through the swinging gate. "You're a great hand to run other people's business," he said. "I've got a notion this might

work out all right if you kept your nose out of it."

Will said: "I'm covering my bets. Sheriff Hatch is standing behind my chair for luck. Good night."

When he reached the street, he stood listening to the clamor from the Red Front. The pianist was still ruining some composer's good intentions, and he could hear Billy Galt's girls' shrill, bought laughter. Just as he started on, he heard a step behind him, and turned his head in time to see someone lunging in.

HE caught the man's arm, and a gun struck the dirt walk. Tom Bell's body came against his, and Will hauled down on his arm so that the Drag Seven rancher semaphored over his shoulder and landed in the street. Bell came up quickly, and Will was there to meet him. He threw in a left that grazed Bell's temple. Bell nailed Will solidly with a blow to the cheekbone. Will stumbled back, and the shorter, heavier man was after him with an earnestness that was more desperation than fury. Will tripped on the steps and went down. Bell turned and tried to scoop up his gun.

Will scrambled after him, swinging a blow that found Bell's ear. Bell straightened, his legs unsteady, and Will sank a short jab to his stomach. Bell's arms spasmodically dropped to cover his midriff, and Will slugged him in the face with rights and lefts until he moaned and fell loosely against him. He let Bell fall, and kicked the gun into the street. He started to go back into the bank; then, realizing the uselessness of it, he went on to the hotel, and to his room.

Will Sargent began to see that he was in a position of some danger. Men facing ruin, or the penitentiary, might do a lot of things they would not ordinarily do. Just what Bell was trying to accomplish by slugging him, was not certain. Perhaps they had intended shanghaiing him to some line-shack until they could clear the mess up; or perhaps Bell had intended to kill him.

Will went to the window. It was a warm night, and the odors that came in the window were of spring, the cool greenness of new grass, the warm smell of dark earth. The little cow-town below stirred to the tempo of the rodeo. But Will Sargent had just learned something that made him see only the shadows.

In Zack Culley's office above the Mercantile, an oil lamp was burning. There was comfort in the thought of the dried-up little attorney's calm hard-headedness, and Will resolved to make the call now that he had intended making in the morning.

Culley grunted when he saw him. He sat down behind the oak desk that

was always covered with work, saying: "What's on your mind, Will?"

Will said: "I need a couple of thousand, Zack. Right now I don't want to tap my bank-account. I may be buying some stock soon. Can you let me have it?"

Andy Sargent had always borrowed from Zack when he needed money. No one knew just how much he kept in the black iron safe, but there was always money there when a good client was in trouble.

"What's the matter with you Sargents?" the lawyer said. "Ed was just in an hour ago wanting to borrow two thousand. I stalled him off."

There was no keeping anything from Zack Culley's sharp eyes. Will said: "This is the same two thousand. Ed's in trouble. I'm buying him out."

Zack made his dry smile. "Aren't you afraid he's a bad risk?"

"I don't expect to get it back. It's just to keep the name clean till he gets out of town. That will be the condition on which I give it to him. If he stays around, it will be one scrape after the other until I'm broke paying for his fun."

From a box on his desk, Culley took a cigar and held it over the lamp until it began to smolder. He took a couple of puffs. "Sure," he said. "I can let you have it if you don't want to touch your account. But isn't this a little early to be buying stock?"

Will grinned. "If I'm ever on trial. I don't want you prosecuting me, Zack. I can't draw on my account for the simple reason that there's no money there."

Will told him the story. Zack Culley frowned; he seemed neither surprised nor upset. "Horton's no banker," he said. "Always knew it would happen. That's why I keep my money in a tin can."

"How would you like to invest some of that money?" Will asked. "You can have Bell's place for seven thousand."

Zack said: "I might, at that. I'd have to hire somebody to run it for me, though—maybe Ed. That's all he needs now, Will—responsibility. He wouldn't have got into this scrape if you'd made him range boss and kept him out of town. There's a lot of good in him, only it needs to be brought out."

"I wish I could see that," Will said. "So far, I've only seen the bad."

He was reaching for his hat when the shot sounded. Up here it was hardly louder than the sound of a pop-gun. But when they looked down into the street, men were running toward the bank. There were two more shots, and the running men suddenly got out of the street. But no one came from the bank, and there were no more shots.

Will paused at the door, waiting for Zack Culley. Culley shook his head. "Tell me about it later," he said. "Blood always makes me sick."

When Will got there, Dutch Taggart, Sheriff Hatch's deputy, was standing in the doorway to keep anyone from going in. Will crowded to the window and looked inside. He saw Hatch poking around in the safe. The man on the floor was Bob Horton. "The easy way out," Will thought; he remembered the three shots.

*Will looked inside.
He saw Hatch poking
around in the safe.*



Hatch bent and took something from the floor. He scratched his head. Then he came to the front door and called out: "Ed Sargent out here?" No one answered.

After a moment Will spoke up: "Will I do?"

Hatch said: "You'll do, Will." He was a red-faced man of middle age, with prematurely white hair and a clipped white mustache, an officer with the dogged singleness of purpose of an aroused bull.

Will went in. He sniffed, and suddenly he knew what the Sheriff was going to ask him. The odor, which he had smelled hundreds of times in the past, made him a little sick.

"What kind of cigars does Ed smoke?" Hatch asked.

Will said: "He smokes cigarettes now. He quit smoking cigars while he was in California."

Hatch showed him a half-smoked cigar, a dark, hard-twisted cheroot with a red-and-gold ring. The label said: "Dolorosa." The Sheriff said: "Ed smokes these things. He and I are the only men in town that don't gag on them. He was smoking one in the Red Front tonight when I went through."

"Maybe you dropped it," Will said.

"I've only been here five minutes, and this thing is stone cold. And I don't throw them away half-smoked. Somebody dropped this in a hurry."

Will Sargent stared at the boneless-looking shape of Bob Horton. The top of his head was torn off, and Will looked away quickly. "Ed's no killer," he said.

Hatch put his hand on Will's shoulder. He said: "I'm sorry, Will, but I'm afraid he was this time. We'll find him and get his story."

But they did not find Ed Sargent that night; and toward morning the searchers gave up and disappeared from the streets. Will sat in his room

with a pint of whisky, thinking of what Zack Culley had said: "He wouldn't have got into this scrape if you'd kept him out of town."

"The damned little skinnit," he thought. "Trying to saddle me with Ed's wild streak." But he was sober enough to know that Ed's trouble was wildness—not criminal meanness. And yet if he needed two thousand dollars badly enough to rob the bank, he might be desperate enough to kill a man who surprised him.

BY morning any man in Mesquite could have the news for the asking: Ed Sargent had murdered Bob Horton and gutted the bank, at a time when the ranchers needed the money most. The city council empowered Sheriff Hatch to offer five hundred dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the murderer. And Tom Bell was elected to assume directorship of the bank until a permanent manager was chosen.

Unshaven, his eyes bloodshot, Will Sargent went down to the restaurant at nine o'clock. The place was full of other men who needed sleep and a shave. Nan Kearny sat with her father at a table near the window. Will tried to get to a seat at the counter without their seeing him, but John Kearny called him over. Will put his hat on the extra chair and sat down.

John Kearny said: "I'm sorry, Will. But it will take more than a cigar-butt to hang him." Kearny was a short man, and stout, with the kind of mouth and eyes for humor or compassion. His hair was still dark and despite his weight he was a vigorous man and bossed his own roundups.

"Ed didn't do it," Will said.

"Maybe not. Or if he did, maybe he had provocation. I was in a mood to kill Horton myself yesterday afternoon."

The Chinaman came for Will's order, and he said, "Coffee," and then looked at Kearny for explanation.

Nan was the one who explained. She said: "I spoke out of turn when I said we wanted to buy your forest lease. When I got back to the hotel, Dad told me that Horton had refused to advance us any more money or even extend the note. He wanted the cash by today. Now Bell is singing the same tune. They're going to auction the place tomorrow."

Will said: "Did Ed know that?"

He spoke so sharply that Nan looked startled. "Why, yes," she said. "He stopped at the hotel on the way to work, and I told him." Then she knew what was in his mind, and she said: "Will!"

Will drank his coffee and stood up. "Suppose you keep that to yourself," he said. "That's just the kind of an acorn a prosecuting attorney could make a hanging oak out of."

As he started to cross the street, he heard her call him, and waited by the hitching-rack. In the sunlight she looked pale, and her features were pinched.

"What are we going to do?" she asked.

"What can we do?" Will said. "He's on his own now. I did what I could for him last night, when I agreed to let him have some money he needed. If he chose to steal to get it, about all we can do is to get Zack Culley to defend him if they catch him."

"He may be lying somewhere wounded. We've got to help him."

"I don't know how."

Nan said quietly: "I wonder if you'd help him if you did know how. I've been waiting a long time for you, Will. I've always thought you had a softness under the hard front you put up. I thought some day you'd have time for love. But now I wonder—"

Will stood there, feeling heavy-footed and inarticulate. He wanted to tell her how long he had tried to declare himself, but while he was groping for the words she turned and went back to the café.

When Will returned to the hotel, Tom Bell was waiting in his room.

Bell had been seated at the window with his feet on the sill. As Will entered, he stood up. Both eyes were discolored from the beating Will had given him and his jaw was swollen. Bell said: "Let's talk about bankin', Will."

"What are you going to do?" Will said. "Foreclose on me?"

Tom Bell said: "I wish I could." He handed Will a check. It was for a

thousand dollars, signed by him as director of the Mesquite Trust and Savings Bank. Will said: "What are you paying this off with—buttons?"

"Look at the date," Bell said. "It's payable a month from today. By that time the bank will be on its feet. The thousand is to keep you from getting talkative—if your own investment isn't enough. The check will be no good if you upset the apple-cart."

Will tore up the check. "No, thanks. If the ship goes down, I'd rather be a passenger. This would be just enough to implicate me. A thousand-dollar gift—for what?"

Bell stood up. He said: "Suit yourself. But if you open your mouth in the wrong places, it will come out of Ed's hide as well as yours."

The undertone of that remark went into Will like a knife. He seized the rancher by the shirt-front and jammed him against the door. "What do you mean?" he said.

Bell did not struggle, but his mouth tightened until the lips were white. "Stop thinking like a Sunday-school teacher," he said. "I mean that if they catch him, we can make it easy or hard. Bob Horton was in the way, anyway. If things go right, that cigar-butt might get lost."

Will opened the door. He said: "Get out of here. Ed didn't kill Horton. But if I have to look at your face much longer, there *will* be a murderer in the family."

WILL sat in his room, all day, smoking a lot, drinking a little, trying to think. He had never been much for liquor; the whisky gave him a headache that grew more oppressive as the hotel room became hot. His mind felt its way clumsily through a conglomerate of facts and emotions.

He slept for an hour, awaking at sundown. He shaved, and afterward poured the pitcher of water over his head and felt his brain clear. What Tom Bell had said about making it easy for Ed had given him a hunch he wanted to test. He buckled on his Colt and went over to the Red Front.

The bar was crowded, but he made his way among deserted tables to the back. Billy Galt was playing poker dice at the counter with a customer. Galt's heavy-browed face hardened when he saw Will.

Will said: "Ed's room—is it locked?"

"Yes," said Galt. "What do you want out of it?"

"I want to look around. Let me have the key."

Galt shook his head, automatically rattling the dice in the leather cup. "Hatch said don't let nobody in it."

"Will you give me the key," Will said, "or do I break the door down?"

Galt rolled the dice. "You talk to the Sheriff about it, cowboy."

Will walked to the stairs, and Galt said quickly: "Don't go up there!"

Will went up to the balcony and tried the knob of the door through which he had seen Ed go the night before. It was locked. He stood back and kicked it just below the knob, and it slammed open. Inside were Ed's cot, unmade, and some dirty clothes on the floor. There was a straight-backed pine chair which immediately drew Will's attention. On its unvarnished back was a ragged brown stain.

Galt came at a purposeful gait toward the door. Will stationed himself beside it. When the saloon-keeper came through, he cracked the barrel of his gun down on Galt's wrist, causing the double-barrelled belly-gun he carried to fall from his fingers. Immediately he shut the door and confronted the swearing man.

He said: "Where's my brother?"

Galt was holding his injured wrist, his face white. "I don't know," he said. "That's why I didn't want you to come up here. I knew you'd see that blood and get suspicious."

Will Sargent took him by the shoulders and sat him down on the cot. He held Galt by the red necktie, his fist six inches below his nose. He said: "I don't mind skinning my fists up a little more. Where did that blood come from?"

Galt said, "I don't—" and Will hit him. Blood began to pour from his nose and his eyes filled with tears. He struggled, and Will struck him on the mouth. Galt stopped fighting.

Again Will put the question. Galt looked desperate, his fat, tawny face smeared with blood, and the carefully arranged hair mussed up. This time he merely shook his head. Will started to hit him again. Then he swore and let the saloon-keeper fall back.

"You wouldn't know the truth if it was labeled," he said. "But if I find out Ed was here, or if you've hurt him, I'm coming back and finish up."

Galt was holding a handkerchief under his nose. "If you come back here," he said, "come with a gun in your hand."

Will left the Red Front with every man in the saloon watching him.

Will Sargent had not seen Doc Blake in months, had hardly spoken to him since his father's death. The Doctor was having dinner on the vine-screened porch of his home at the south end of town when Will came up the walk. Mrs. Blake was a warm-hearted woman who was almost as much of a figure in town as her husband. She said to Will:

"Set down, Will. I'll get your plate."

Will said: "Well, I might. Man gets tired of a Chinaman's cooking."

Doc Blake said: "I thought you might be up this morning. I reduced some swellin' around Tom Bell's eyes. Just thought you might have been in the same scrap."

Will grinned. "I was. I almost needed some patching done on my skull, but I saw him coming. I guess you know why I'm here, Doc."

"You want to know if I've taken care of Ed."

Will kept his eyes on Doc's face. It ethics kept him from talking, perhaps his expression would tell him what he had to know.

"I'll tell you this much, Will," the Doctor said. "I took a bullet out of his thigh this morning. He's going to be all right. He's in good hands."

Will sat back. He said: "Then he was there. Is he at Billy Galt's?"

Mrs. Blake was back with a warmed plate and a cup of coffee. She put them before Will. Doc Blake handed him a serving dish. He said: "He's in town, and he'd rather you didn't know where. Have some spuds."

TEN o'clock Friday was set for the auction of John Kearny's Hatchet ranch. Tom Bell had a table set up on the porch of the bank, and a large crowd waited in the hot sun while Bell read the list of properties being auctioned. A half-dozen other ranches, all small, were to go on the block. Their owners were standing around looking angry and bewildered. There was only one bright spot in the picture, as Will saw it, and that was that Tom Bell had been forced to abandon his campaign to win Nan.

The rodeo would begin in two hours, but there was no holiday mood over the gathering. There was more of the feeling of a funeral, as one by one the labor and hopes of ranchers who had signed call notes or let time-loans lapse were laid away. Morley Lang, from Silver City, took one of the irons. His presence there disturbed Will Sargent. He had come for the rodeo, but the auction was only an added attraction for him. Lang was a big cattleman with property all over New Mexico. If he bid on the Hatchet ranch and took it, he would not consider it funny if someone tried to explain the situation to him later to get him to re-sell to John Kearny at cost.

Bell finished with the small ranches and picked up his notes. "The last item being offered," he said, "is the Kearny ranch. Bidding will start at two thousand dollars. Do I hear twenty-five hundred?"

Will said: "Two thousand."

"Two thousand I have," said Bell. Then he recognized Will, and he stared hard at him, his eyes saying: "Keep out of this. Spoil the show and you sink with us." Bell thumped the table. "Who'll say twenty-five hun-

dred?" He looked at Morley Lang. A check on the Silver City bank would suit his needs exactly.

Morley Lang's bass voice said: "Twenty-two."

Somewhere in the crowd Zack Culley said: "Twenty-three."

"Twenty-four!" Will said.

Lang was silent. Bell's face grew red, and he handled the mallet nervously. "Twenty-four hundred wouldn't pay for the Hatchet ranch-house," he said. "I'm offering twelve

Ed said sharply: "Cover the stairs!" Will unlocked the door to the landing.



hundred grade cattle and a hundred blooded shorthorns, ranging on sixty sections of fine grama. Who'll steal this ranch at three thousand?"

"Twenty-six!" Zack Culley said.

Morley Lang said: "Thirty-five hundred dollars!"

The crowd murmured, and Tom Bell beamed. He pounded the table, asking for four thousand. Zack Culley did not bid again. Will did not dare jeopardize his own hopes of coming out of the fiasco solvent by bidding any higher.



Tom Bell raised the mallet. "Last chance, gentlemen. Thirty-five hundred once—"

The window behind Bell went into jangling slivers. A moment later the crash of a rifle echoed and re-echoed through the street. Bell whirled and dived through the door. The crowd broke.

Sheriff Hatch stood almost alone in the street, his gun pointed in the air as he bawled: "Who fired that shot?"

It was a foolish question that the empty buildings and alleys answered with chuckling echoes.

Will Sargent was one of the men who went through the buildings on the west side of the street, from foundation to roof. Hatch had split the men into two companies and detailed one to each end of the street, with instructions to work in toward the center of town. If the gunman were in any of those buildings, he was boxed up tight.

The name on everyone's lips now was: "Ed Sargent!" Somehow the

search had evolved into a manhunt for Ed again. Who else would be fool enough to risk his life to stop an auction?

Will recalled what Ed had said that night in the Red Front: "I'm the Robin Hood of roulette." Thinking about it, Will believed that had not been entirely a joke: probably Ed had taken pleasure in breaking bigger men and letting the hard-luck boys go away with their pockets bulging.

He found himself growing proud of Ed. Suddenly he wished he could unroll the past and make a lot of changes—give Ed some responsibility, as Zack had suggested; meet him halfway. Suddenly he remembered Doc Blake.

Where the devil was Doc? He looked around, and to his surprise saw the physician standing quite close to him. When Will approached, Doc Blake said: "You haven't much time."

Will said: "Where is he?"

Blake was looking at the little block of unsearched buildings. "Well, now, where would you think? In the stage office, the Mercantile, or Zack Culley's place?"

Will looked up at the shaded windows of the lawyer's office above Howard's Mercantile. "Is he able to hold a gun?" he asked.

"He's probably holding one right now."

Will said: "Tell them for me that if anybody but Hatch comes up the stairs, we'll fight it out to the last shell. Hatch will give him a square deal, but Bell would never let him leave the place alive."

"I'll tell them," Blake said.

An outside covered stairway gave the only access to Zack Culley's office and living quarters. Will was near the top of the stairs when he heard Ed's voice from the deep shadows above.

"You're not coming in here, Will," Ed Sargent said. "I mean it."

Will did not answer. He continued up the stairs.

"I'm playing the hand out," Ed said. "Neither you nor anybody else is going to take me. If you come one more step, I'll fire."

Will went on. A gun roared, cleaving the darkness with a stab of orange, the sound striking Will as a physical blow. The bullet went out the roof of the staircase, admitting a shaft of daylight. Will reached the landing, and his brother said, "Damn you, Will!" and let him come inside. Down in the street men were shouting, gathering before the Mercantile to stare up.

Ed locked the door. Will looked around. In the darkened room he saw Zack Culley at his desk. Over by a window was Nan Kearny.

Nan said: "It took you long enough to find him, Will. I knew if you wanted to badly enough, you would."

"You've got to get out of here, Nan," Will said quickly. "They're coming up."

"Save your breath," Ed told him. "She thinks she's taking care of me. We've been telling her to get out for an hour."

Will said: "I told Doc Blake to tell the Sheriff that we'd surrender to him and nobody else. Hatch will see that Bell has no chance to start a lynching party. . . . Ed," he said bluntly, "did you kill Bob Horton?"

Ed said: "No. Tom Bell killed him."

"How do you know?"

Ed had the curtain up an inch and was watching the crowd in the street. "I was there," he said. "I knew Horton was going to foreclose on the Hatchet, and I thought I could stall it off by getting the mortgage or the books. I went down to the bank, and I saw you in there and heard the whole story. When you came out, I faded back. That was when Bell almost got you. After you left, Horton came out and tried to bring Bell to."

"I slipped inside and was going out the back with the paper and the books when they came in. Horton came after me, and Bell shot him in the back of the head. He tried to get me too, but I spoiled his shot and he only winged me. I made it over to my room at the Red Front and stayed there until things got quiet. Then I came down here." He looked at the attorney and laughed. "Zack's been trying to build up a case for me ever since."

ZACK CULLEY stood up, stuffed some papers in a brief-case and shoved the bank-notes under the desk.

"Mister," he said, "I've got a case! If you can hold them off until I talk to Hatch, I'll hang Bell and put Galt in Santa Fe. And I'll keep the bank afloat by covering the deficit with the proceeds from the Red Front and the Drag Seven."

He went down the stairs. Will knelt at the window beside his brother. "I'm all done building houses and planting vineyards," he said, "and my spirit is plenty vexed. Will you shake hands with a damned fool, Ed?"

Ed gripped his hand. "The old man wasn't so wrong," he said. "We'll have to write this down in the family Bible."

A bullet came through the window, shattering the glass and punching a round hole in the green curtain. Tom Bell shouted: "Come on out, boys!" It's now or later."

Will pressed close beside the adobe sill. "Is Hatch down there?" he shouted.

There was no answer, except a slug that gouged the mud wall near his head. Will knew that Zack Culley must have Hatch cornered some-

where, talking hard and fast to save Ed's life. The question would be whether he could talk fast enough. Ed pushed the barrel of his carbine through the window and fired at Bell, but he had to shoot almost without aiming. The rancher lost his expensive white Stetson, and ducked close to the front wall of the Mercantile.

Ed said sharply: "Cover the stairs!"

Will unlocked the door and stepped onto the landing. He saw the dazzlingly bright rectangle of dirt walk below, covering that target with his gun. Then he heard a man shouting.

"Hold up, boys! Ed Sargent aint our man! Bell—you're the one I want."

In the sudden hush, spurred boots made a quick, imperative sound on the dirt walk. Hatch yelled, "Halt!" but the running men came on. A pistol cracked once. Tom Bell slewed into the stairway and came pounding up the stairs, with Billy Galt right behind him. Galt paused at the foot of the steps to throw an unaimed shot at the Sheriff. And Will Sargent knew why it was worth risking life itself to Tom Bell to get upstairs. A man and a book were up there who could hang him.

Will said: "Get 'em up, Bell."

Bell fired, the bullet crashing into a riser behind Will. Will's gun bucked. Tom Bell sagged against the wall, his left arm hanging limp, his gun-hand faltering. Again his Colt exploded, but the slug struck only a few feet above him. Will put another shot into him, and Bell sprawled back into Billy Galt.

Galt tried to use Bell as a shield, leveling his little belly-gun across the dying man's shoulder. Will fired twice, aiming at the saloon-keeper's red necktie. His shots were high, punching into the center of Billy Galt's face. The derringer fell unfired. Galt and Bell sprawled down the steps and lay still.

Someone thrust the barrel of a shotgun around the corner into the stairway. Will called quickly: "Hold your fire. It's all over."

Ed Sargent came down the steps, using the carbine as a cane. They were dragging Galt and Bell out, and Will still stood there. Ed said: "And they call me the wild one!"

Will started to help him down the stairs, but Ed pushed him away. "Go on up there," he said. "I'm tired of sitting around for two days listening to her wonder whether you were too old to change your ways."

Will Sargent went slowly up the stairs. He was thinking of the verse from Luke that Andy Sargent had meant for Ed. It seemed to Will that he was the one it fitted:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again.

A story of 1944—and of 481 B.C., by H. Bedford-Jones



COSGRAVE woke up suddenly. The armored truck was jolting along through the night; the radium-lit hands of his watch told him it was nearly four in the morning. He sat up, wide awake with dismay, and shook Lundgren repeatedly.

The back end of the truck was open, for the rain had ceased the previous evening. Cosgrave looked out, but dawn had not yet come up. The Italian hills were invisible under the stars. Lundgren woke at last.

"Whaddaya want?" he demanded sleepily.

"Wake up! Something's wrong!" exclaimed Cosgrave. "We were supposed to embark at midnight in the big push for Greece. Now it's morning, and the truck's still going! Either the driver is lost, or those Eighth Army brass-hats have pulled a joker on us!"

Lundgren sat up in the darkness.

"Something always going wrong," he muttered. "Damn the war! Where's

that Major Somebody who was with us?"

"Nobody else here," reported Cosgrave. "And we're boxed, dammit! Can't reach the driver—"

The rattle and roar of the truck would have drowned out anything short of a mine-explosion. The whole front end of the truck was packed solidly with their equipment; from their blankets at the rear of this, they could not hope to reach the driver.

Something gravely wrong, indeed. From the Eighth Army base in the hills back of Ortona, to the sea and the embarkation of the big push for Greece, should have been a mere hour's drive—but the truck had been pounding along all night! Further, here in the truck were packed all their equipment; here were the delicate instruments with which they had been carrying on their radar experiments,

and pushing their discoveries far beyond the electronic bounds of radar itself—those discoveries of a nature so amazing that neither Cosgrave nor Lundgren could understand them or fathom their scope. If something had gone wrong, not they alone were threatened, but all their work. To lie here in the truck and be driven far astray, helpless to interfere, was maddening.

Dawn was creeping up the dark sky-depths, when they became aware of sudden jerks, of roaring engine-coughs, then of slowing speed. The truck was in trouble. It ground slowly to a halt. The two Americans, poised, jumped as it stopped, in hot haste to interview their driver. But that helmeted Brit-

The FABIAN SWORD

isher was exchanging somewhat delirious Italian with two countrymen, and vented hot oaths as Cosgrave came running up.

"Bli' me, they don't know their own blarsted lingol!" he exclaimed. Another figure appeared, climbing down. It was Major Barnes, the staff Intelligence officer who had been with Cosgrave and Lundgren when they started. He waved his hand cheerfully to them, and directed fluent Italian at the two countrymen. The driver was already getting under the hood of the truck.

"Everything under control," said Barnes. "We're a bit out of our way, but there's an advanced post a mile ahead—"

"This isn't where we were supposed to go!" Cosgrave and Lundgren yam-

mered at him by turns. "Look at these hills around! Where's the embarkation port? What do you mean—"

Barnes grinned and joined them, flinging a word at the driver.

"The automatic choke's gone wrong? Well, drive on till you reach the advanced post, then we'll see about it. I'll ride in back." He motioned the two Americans to the rear. "Come along. I'll explain. I've good news for you two chaps."

THEY climbed in, all three, and Barnes lit a cigarette. The truck started on again.

"Back at Headquarters," he explained, "everyone supposed the big push was on—and so it was, but not for Greece. That was a blind. No help for it; only the highest officers knew the truth. Your Fifth Army has the Jerries on the run at last and is pushing through for Rome. Our forces have linked up with yours and are driving up the coast and in toward

Rome by the Via Cassilina. We're somewhere past Avezzano now and on the road to Forl. There it is in a nutshell."

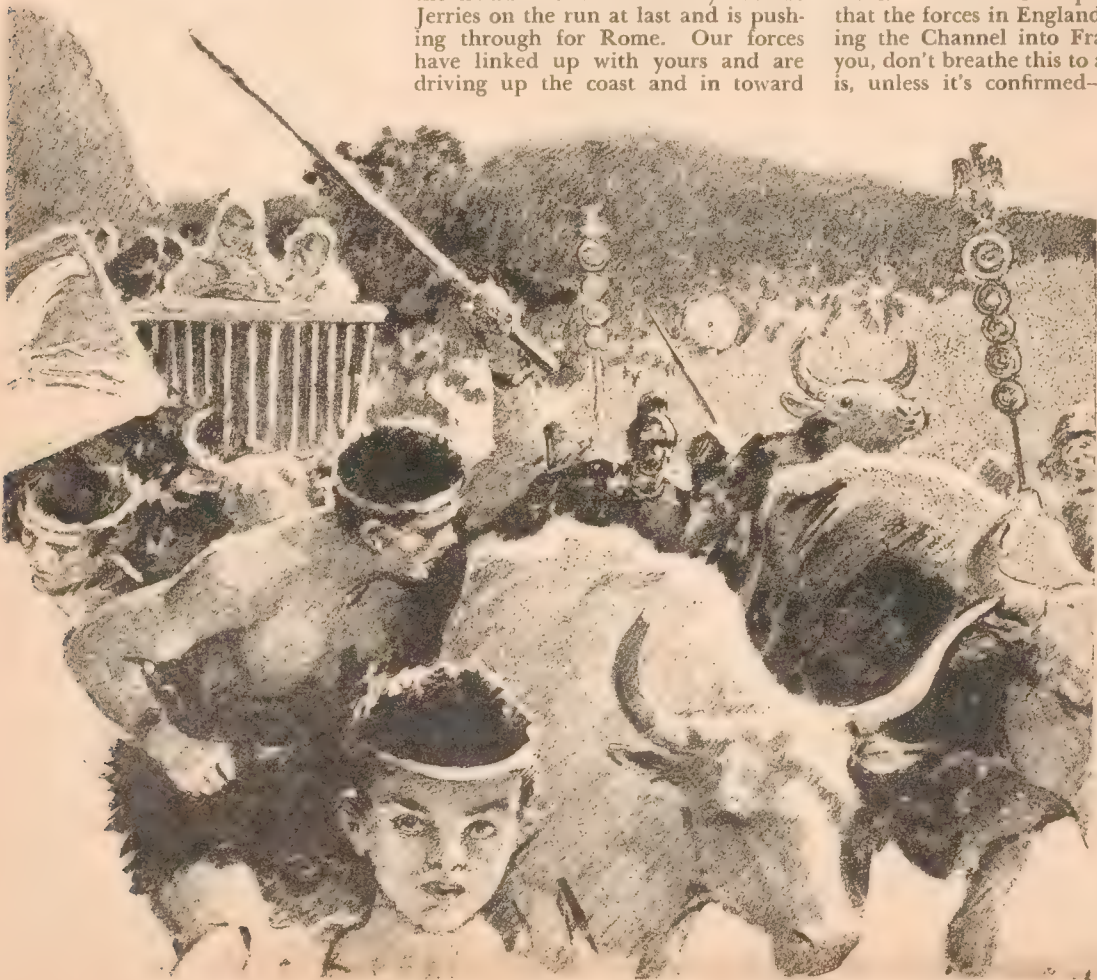
The two gaped at him in the growing daylight.

"We're not going to Greece?" exclaimed Cosgrave.

"Devil a bit of it. We're sending you to join the Fifth Army—back to your own people, as we promised. I'm supposed to deliver you and your equipment safely. The last word I had, the Jerries had broken, and the road to Rome was open."

"Why weren't we told!" cried Lundgren.

"Sorry, old chap. Only the highest officers knew the truth about the big push." Barnes dropped his voice. "But I'll make up for it with a word more. I'd not be surprised to find that the forces in England were jumping the Channel into France. Mind you, don't breathe this to a soul! That is, unless it's confirmed—"



Shouts greeted them, the truck slowed, they looked out to see that they were coming slap into a hillside village. Jeeps and staff cars and helmeted figures were crowded on all sides. They halted, Barnes jumped out, and half a dozen officers surrounded him. Jubilant voices were everywhere; the sense of it burst upon Cosgrave as he listened.

Rome was taken!

The two American scientist-officers, long separated from their own forces, found it like a dream. Things had been happening. The Nazi lines had been broken everywhere. As eager tongues babbled around them, as they were taken into a house occupied as Headquarters, as they sat down to a steaming hot breakfast with two British generals and no end of lesser brass-hats, it was like a dream. *Rome was taken!*

Breakfast, bath, shave, a change of clothes—and Barnes brought bad news about their own job: Their truck must have engine repairs, which would take the day. There was no other truck here. They could have a jeep and be sent on—

"And abandon our equipment? Not much!" said Lundgren. Cosgrave nodded assent.

"Then," said Barnes, "will you do us a favor? These officers are wild to see your amazin' performance—the electronic thing, you know. I can have everything unpacked and set up in no time if you say the word. What price a look at Rome—eh?"

Cosgrave and Lundgren exchanged glances, and Cosgrave laughed.

"A look at Rome? Why not?"

"Okay by me, John," said Lundgren. "Let's celebrate, you bet! But isn't this outfit on the move, Barnes?"

"Not at the moment," replied the British Intelligence man, who had spent long years in Italy and knew the country like a book. "They expect to move later. Going our way, too; hope to effect a junction with your forces. Well, I'll bustle off and start the work."

So it happened that an hour later Cosgrave sat before their instruments and Lundgren saw to the hook-up, while two very curious generals fired questions at them, and staff officers crowded into the darkened village hall to see the sight.

"No, no, it's not radar at all," Cosgrave had to explain. "It uses electronic forces far beyond those of radar. It uses light-waves, yes, and sound-waves—collects 'em from the astral plane, for all I know. We don't savvy it ourselves."

"But this enormous screen you've set up—"

"Call it a cinema screen," said Cosgrave wearily. How to make others comprehend what neither he nor

Lundgren could comprehend? "The oscillations affect it, yes. It can tell you the weather fifty, a hundred miles from here—but it goes farther. It reaches out and collects from interstellar space the happenings of the dim past."

"Aren't there hills between here and Rome?"

"Hills affect radar; this is not radar. Nothing affects it," said Cosgrave. "Better sit down, everybody! Talk as you like. The tubes are warming up. Ready, Lundgren?"

"Let her go, John," came the reply, and Cosgrave threw the control switch.

THE leaping spark, the hum of tubes, the growing play of colors on the screen—now as always, he looked forward eagerly to what would appear. The direction-guide was pointed for Rome, but would it pick up Rome? He could not tell. Small chance here for delicate operation; it was largely a blind guess. Barnes could probably identify any locality they might pick up, for Barnes knew central Italy like the palm of his hand.

Colors deepened on the screen. Men smoked, chatted, waited; as yet nothing could dwarf the great exultant fact filling every mind—*Rome was taken!* Then, with the force of actual shock, for an instant the figure of a man leaped into sight on the screen, large as life, clear-cut—a man wearing a queer form of helmet in glittering bronze, a face so filled with savage vibrant life and energy as to strike at them all with reality. Then it vanished.

"Etruscan, by gad!" said the voice of Barnes. "An Etruscan helmet, that!"

The room quieted. Cosgrave dialed with delicate touch. The huge bulbous tubes with their mica diaphragms heated and reddened. The screen leaped with tumultuous colors that took abrupt form and shape—there, outspread in living sunshine, was a landscape. Not the picture of a landscape, but an actual scene of craggy rock and high swelling downs, a bubbling brook in the foreground, swelling to unite with a river of large size.

"Anybody recognize the spot?" Lundgren asked. "It's not Rome, certainly."

"Hold on! I know the place!" Barnes spoke up. "About eleven miles north of Rome. That brook is called La Valca, and runs into the Tiber—in ancient days it was known as the Cremera. And those swelling heights—by Jove! That's Isola Farnese, the spot where the city of Veii stood, the great Etruscan city that rivaled Rome—almost within the city limits now."

Amazement stilled his words. For upon the scene grew change: Those naked heights, dotted with a few vil-

las and farms, became a city rising in magnificence—just a brief flash of it, before it was gone.

The screen broke into color, then took shape again for a momentary glimpse of a river, and low hills on the other side of it, and on two of these hills a stone-walled town. With startling suddenness a voice spoke, as though from the screen itself.

"The hills of Rome! There they are, lad. Look well at them. Small and rugged and strong are the hearts and walls. A little people, not like the rich and lordly Etruscans; but we have learned the secret they will never learn—the conquest of fate, the conquest of death! We of the Fabian family know it. Now look at Veii once more. . . ."

Cosgrave felt his skin creep. He knew that it was a voice from some dim past day. So did these Englishmen, most of them classical scholars.

"I say!" said someone. "Veii was destroyed somewhere around 300 B. C.!"

"After fourteen wars with Rome," another voice chimed in. "Here—look at it!"

Suddenly the whole screen became alive; it was as though a window were opened in the wall. There in the distance loomed the glorious heights of Veii; but here, closer at hand, was part of a wall above the brook. A massive wall, two people standing on it, and overlooking the top of this rocky crag, about which the huge wall ran, with two ditches outside it, and a bustle of people among the huts and crowded little houses within. The two close at hand were a boy and a man—the boy a handsome fellow of fifteen, the man a sinewy, grizzled veteran clad in leather stained and marked by armor.

"Remember it all your life, lad," said the man. "Here we are, the first family in Rome, the entire Fabian gens, every one of us patricians! There's your father at the gate—Cæso Fabius: he was Consul last year and led us here. The Fabian family, says he, will hold that craggy rock between Rome and Veii while the rest of Rome fights the other tribes, we'll hold off these damned Etruscans! And we've done it. Three hundred and six of us, wives and children and babes—we've done it, by the gods! Outfought them in their thousands!"

"But it's peace now, Uncle Cossus," said the boy.

"Aye, it's peace, while it lasts," the grim man grunted scornfully.

"And I'm going to Veii with Father this afternoon to talk with their princes and see the sights."

"Aye, and sights in plenty! All the riches and refinements and culture of the world—hell swallow them all!" growled Cossus. "We want no riches, we Romans! Let others gather riches,



and we'll take them with the strong hand if we need 'em. Mind you, now, no wine when you go over yonder! And don't talk to any of those painted women around the streets. You can't trust these Etruscans a spear's-cast! And, above all, don't let out a word about our going to Rome tomorrow. That's a secret, Marcus."

"Trust me," the boy rejoined. "All the same, Father said I could have one of those handsome swords with the fine grips. He's going to get me one."

"Better stick to plain Roman steel, for luck," answered the other. "Handsome is as handsome does, when it comes to weapons. I wouldn't swap my old blade for all the gold-mounted doodads in Etruria, by Hercules!" He turned to look out across the Tiber at the low hills of Rome, and his scarred features softened. "Ah, there's a city worth all the pretty nonsense in the world—a city of men, strong men!"

Three hundred and six of them, every man a Fabius—the greatest and noblest family of Rome, down to the last chick and child—here on the crag above the junction of the Cremera and the Tiber. Protected by precipices and strong walls, they had been here close to a year, holding in check all the lordly might of Etruria that threatened the growing power of little Rome.

Veii lay yonder stretching up the slopes of her citadel, a city to rival Athens in splendor of culture and richness. Greatest of the twelve Etruscan cities whose commerce spread across the Seven Seas, whose fleets and warships shared the wealth of the world with Carthage and Tyre, Veii had been held in check these long months by three hundred Fabian swords, while Rome fought out her desperate struggle with enemies to east and south. Grim Cossus might well be proud; it was a great feat of arms. Almost from the very founding of Rome, over two hundred years ago, she had been battling the Etruscans. Nine long wars had been fought, and Rome survived.

A STRANGE race, those Romans, men of iron throughout. Right and left they destroyed the beauty and culture of the Etruscans, savagely wiping it out, going back to their own little bare, stony city on the Tiber, despising the splendor and wealth and refined civilization of other peoples. Now they were bitterly feared and hated, and cared not a whit. One Roman like Cossus Fabius could walk disdainfully among a thousand Etruscans and cow the lot of them.

They were not all like him. There was that spindly-shanked fellow with

the furtive eyes and the oily smile, Aulus the scribe. He had come along with the rest, being a distant connection of the Fabian clan, and Cæso made use of him. Cæso, the father of Marcus, was of course no longer Consul, his term having expired; but he was the head of the family and was in command here.

They went up to Veii that afternoon—Cæso Fabius, Marcus, Aulus the scribe, and half a dozen of the chief men of the family. To Marcus, it was actually stepping into another world. Everything was different. There was not a statue in Rome, for instance, but Veii had them by the score, Etruscan, Cretan and Greek, even Egyptian. Bazaars, wineshops, musicians, pretty girls, beautiful things on all sides—all of them getting only a curl of the lip from the hard-eyed Romans, but a second glance from Marcus the boy.

Peace there might be; but no love was lost on either side. For Marcus, indeed, there was a double excitement. Today it was Veii, and tomorrow it would be Rome! For since all was now at peace, on the morrow the garrison were to leave their crag and visit Rome in order to make sacrifices at the family shrine there—an imperative yearly duty, now overdue. But to be safe about it, the matter was kept se-

diet. Everyone, women and children, had to share in the sacrifices, which was about the only form of gayety known in Rome; it was a duty toward the gods; and being the most superstitious people on earth, none of the Romans could shirk such a duty. Just to be on the safe side, however, they did not intend to let the Etruscans know about it.

NO wine, no pretty painted girls, everybody keep together, were the orders. Marcus obeyed strictly, but he could use his eyes, and did, as the party moved through the gay noisy streets toward the palace of Lars Aruns—Lord Aruns, chief of the princes who ruled Veii. Small blame to him for looking at the girls! None of your prim-faced Roman women in plain skirts, but laughing, gorgeous creatures whose dresses looked like wings, and were made of diaphanous woven stuffs that did not half hide the beauties within.

No harsh formality here, either, even in the palace itself. People were courteous, pleasant, merry; laughter was everywhere. Foreigners of all kinds were here, even in the palace. And the guards! Those magnificent weapons, and the grotesque but beautiful armor! Marcus felt ashamed of the plain iron-hilted swords his father and Cossus carried.

Lars Aruns received them hospitably, offering wine and fruit, and settled down to discuss various matters that needed settlement. Here in the palace there was no longer need to keep in company to avoid a fight, and the party was free to scatter. Marcus slipped off with grim old Cossus.

"Is it true," he asked, "that they have rooms here for men and women to use, with running water? Or is that just a story?"

"True enough," said Cossus, laughing. "Come along—I'll show you." He led the way into a gorgeous tiled room where water ran into basins; and when Marcus washed, a slave sprang into sight with a soft fluffy towel. Old Cossus was hugely amused by the boy.

"A lot different from those old tumbledown privies we have in Rome, eh?" said he, as they walked through the corridors. "If we—"

He checked himself, caught Marcus by the shoulder, drew him back.

"There, lad—look, just around the corner! It's that smirking scribe of ours, be damned to him—"

Marcus looked, cautiously. A dozen or more guards and palace servants were there, watching a magician perform tricks; and among them was Aulus the scribe. He was not watching the magician, however. He was talking at one side, earnestly, with a man robed as a priest. Cossus took a look at them, and turned away.

"I know that rascally priest—can't place him, though. Come on, let's get back."

They rejoined the others. Cæso Fabius, his errand with the Prince done, refused a number of gifts brought to them, refused them curtly, even churlishly.

"I came to discuss matters with you, not to receive pretty baubles."

He started with the party; and Cossus, away on an errand of his own, met them at the palace gates. Their womenfolk, said Cossus, would have liked those pretty gifts.

"Hell take their gifts!" growled Cæso. "Every eye that looks at us here has hatred at the back of it. How they'd love to murder us! I wish they'd try it."

They stalked along, a grim little band amid all the pleasant people thronging the streets, and a quick way was made for them. Crowds gathered to see the barbarians, but kept well out of reach. Rufinus Fabius, with his long neck and red thatch, gibed and jeered at every Etruscan soldier in sight, until Cæso called him to heel.

Cossus let out a yap. "I've got it—Priscus!" he exclaimed. "That's the rascally priest who was kicked out of Rome two years ago! Come here, Aulus. What were you and that priest talking about, back at the palace? Out with it!"

The scribe wet his lips and turned pale, but forced an oily smirk.

"Business, noble Cossus, business! Arranging to get some fresh reed pens and a supply of papyrus, for keeping the accounts," he said plausibly. "And didn't I see you off in a corner with Tarquin, captain of the guards?"

"You did," said Cossus; "but I was after a sword, not after a pen."

Marcus wondered why the scribe's eye flitted around, and why he seemed so relieved when his plausible story was accepted. The answer was to come soon enough.

They came back to the walled camp on the crag. The Fabian left in charge there, nicknamed Stentor because of his loud voice, greeted them with huge glee and waved a brute of a sword he had forged and sharpened.

"While you're running after painted girls and ladylike Etruscan soldiers, see what I've finished!" he roared. He was thick in the head as well as in the chest, but had the strength of ten. "Ha! Here's a sword—worth while, a blade for a Hercules!"

"No good," said Rufinus, his cousin. "Too heavy by half, and long i' the flank. Use it for an hour, and you'll be done up."

"Bah, long-shanks! It'll do twice the work of your toothpick!" bellowed Stentor. "What luck in the city, Cæso? Any sign of those dogs making war on us?"

"None." Cæso Fabius frowned. "They speak us soft, and that's a bad sign. I've a notion to leave some of you here tomorrow, to guard the place while we're at Rome."

"No, no!" went up a storm of voices. "The family must sacrifice as a family! The gods will be angry if we put it off longer!"

This was true, so Cæso shrugged and acquiesced. After all, it was only a march of four miles or so to Rome—was not the Janiculum in plain sight from here? The slaves and a few freedmen could be left to hold the place. The entire family must go; every member of it must be present at the sacrifice.

"Very well. We'll get off at sunrise sharp, then," said Cæso, "and be back here early."

Once inside the walls, Cossus took his nephew aside and gave him a nudge and a wink.

"I've got a sword for you, nephew," said he, winking. "I met that fellow Tarquin, captain of the guards of Lars Aruns, and we had a few words. He's not a bad sort, and for a few bits of loot agreed to hand over an excellent blade—one of those leaf-shaped Etruscan swords. Said he'd deliver it here tomorrow or next day. I told him to come next day, and he agreed."

Marcus was more than delighted; now he could lord it over the other young fellows with a vengeance! An Etruscan blade was something to boast about, so long as the Censor in Rome got no word of it.

THAT night Marcus heard his father moving about restlessly. For some reason Cæso Fabius was uneasy, and kept the guards on the alert; but nothing happened. Before sunrise the camp was astir. Oxen and other sacrificial victims were selected, washed, and decorated with ribbons and garlands; and at the first level rays of sunlight, the march was begun.

They filed down the steep path, driving the animals along, and started on the dusty way to Rome. Here near the river were dense thickets, and as Marcus stepped out beside his father, he pointed to the trees on their right.

"Look at the queer flashes, Father!" he cried. "The leaves glint like glass!"

Cæso Fabius looked, and a deep, sudden groan burst from him.

"Cossus! Rufinus!" lifted his voice. "Halt the vanguard on that rise of ground by the river! Close up, you in the rear—close up, for the love of the gods!"

There was a small bit of rising ground ahead, clear of trees, alongside the river. Rufinus halted the first of the crowd there, everyone wondering at the reason. Cæso came striding up to them, his anxious voice bidding the rear to close up.

"Caught, by the gods!" said he. "Somebody has given us away. Armed men are posted among the trees. There's time to get away—at least, some can get back to the camp."

"Romans turn their backs?" yapped a voice. "Not likely, Cæso! We'll run when you do, Consul!"

Cossus took off his helmet and wiped his forehead. His keen gaze probed around.

"Aye. Looks like we're nipped," said he. "Shall we send on to the city for help?"

"The Fabian family send for help?" jeered Rufinus. "Since when were we that weak?"

"Form up the women and children in the center," Cæso ordered.

Here came Aulus the scribe, licking furtive lips, eyes flitting about.

"Some can drop into the river and swim downstream to safety," said he. One of the boys picked up a stone and hurled it at him, striking him in the face. Cossus let out a sudden yelp.

"Ha! By Hercules! You're the rat who betrayed us, Aulus! Catch him, there—seize him! If you don't find

One of the women seized a spear and drove it through Aulus, and he died there.





Defeat of the Fabians from an old engraving. (Bettmann Archive)

Etruscan gold on him, may I be damned! Quick about it—"

Aulus let out a bleat of terror and tried to run for it. Someone brought him down, and next minute there was a yell as a purse of fat Etruscan gold-pieces was held up. One of the women—she was the aunt of Aulus—seized a spear and drove it through him, and he died there.

All around, except on the river side, spears and helms were glinting. Men were on the move, circling, bringing up their cohorts. Cæso looked out at the masses of soldiery.

"They think well of us, Fabians," said he. "Not hundreds, but thousands!"

This was true. With deliberate, deadly certainty the ambush was broken. Dust drifted up. Trumpets spoke out. Yells pealed. About the sacrificial victims on the hillock grouped the women and children; the men ringed them in, weapons ready.

"THERE'S Rome!" said a wistful voice, and eyes went cityward. From the hillock they could see the Janiculum hill. The voice of Cæso rang suddenly out.

"No, by the gods! Here's Rome—here!" he cried, and struck his sword into the earth at his feet. Voices rose in grim acclaim. He looked at Marcus, and smiled.

"The family of Fabius, son—look well at it, for the last time!"

"Standards!" cried Rufinus. "By the gods, it's an army!"

So it was—the standards of Veii, of Clusium, of Volterra, of the other Etruscan cities, were all lifting in the level sunlight. And now, with a burst of trumpets, here came Lars Aruns and his bodyguard—the same Lars Aruns who had smiled on them the day before, with the men of Veii leading the attack in a whirlwind rush.

"No quarter!" lifted their shouts. "Death to the barbarians! Death to Fabius!"

They rolled in upon that little circle of steel—three hundred and six; and the circle wasted no breath in shouting, but shrank back a little and then met the charge with a rush of ferocity that swept the men of Veii like corn under the sickle. Almost, as the battle was broken, those yelling ranks were shattered and riven by Roman stabbing spear and sword, and the clangor of steel on steel lifted above the shouts and screams. Dead and wounded strewn the slope, and the broken ranks streamed backward with the Romans leaping after them and slaying.

Then suddenly the group of women broke and rushed forth upon the dead and hurt, stabbing the latter and stripping the former, bringing back with them shield and sword and spear, and the three hundred cheered them with wild laughter. Long-necked Rufinus caught his wife in a quick embrace, lifted his young son and kissed him, and pressed a bloody sword into his hand.

"Here's Rome, Fabius!" he yelled excitedly. Others lifted the shout.

Marcus, sword in hand and heart in throat, looked proudly at his father, and cheered with the rest. He saw Cossus coming to him and flinging a fine Etruscan blade at his feet.

"There y'are, nephew! Tarquin delivered it himself, as promised—and by Hercules, how he squirmed when I got him! Wipe his blood off it, and use it for Rome."

MARCUS leaped at the weapon and cleaned it on his tunic.

"Close ranks, close ranks!" blared the orders. "'Ware Clusium—close up!"

Here was Clusium indeed—row upon row of those hardy men from the far north of Etruria, splendidly armed, splendidly trained, coming in at the double, to wipe out the three hundred at one blow. Proudest of the Twelve Cities was Clusium—but her splendid ranks reeled and halted as the Roman steel met them, and the ringing clang of metal rent the air, and the dust streamed up in the sunlight, and men died.

For neither hatred nor overwhelming power could stand against the cold, savage ferocity of that thin steel circle. When Romans struck, they struck to kill; and these three hundred were the very cream of all Romans, the elite of those fighting clans. They met the attack with deadly counter-attack. Each man an athlete, steel-hard, perfect master of his weapons, the Fabians with Cæso at their head smashed that charge as a rock smashes a wave, and Cæso himself hewed down the prince of Clusium and completed their disorder. For a little every man was too busy killing to hear or see anything else.

This ferocity cost them dear, for the ranks of Volterra came in from one side and smote them. There the Fabians began to die, being out of close order and somewhat scattered. Volterra thrust in, broke the circle, fell upon the women and children—and then swift dismay smote them. For these women met steel with steel, and Marcus leading them, avenged with shrill screams and utter fury the trampled or speared children, until the men of Volterra actually took to flight in blind terror. By now, the slopes were all heavy with corpses, and blood ran down the grassy ways in streams.

"Close up!" lifted the voice of Cæso. "Good work, Marcus Fabius! Well done, women of Fabius! Close up!"

The women, shrill-voiced, bloody furies, took place with the men. The circle was smaller now. Stentor was leaning on his dripping new blade, and Rufinus jeered at him.

"What, big voice! Arm tired? I told you so, old colossus! You can't swing that weaver's beam of yours forever!"

Cossus and the captain stood together, and Marcus joined them.

"That's Cære forming up," said Cæso Fabius, calmly. Blood was dripping from under his corselet, running down one leg. "Shields up, everyone! 'Ware spears!"

The spearmen of Cære were advancing in a solid mass. Javelins were lifted and flung, to rattle like rain on shields and helmets; but some found a mark. The mass bore on up the slope, over the dead, and slipped on the bloody grass. With a growl and a yell, the Fabian ranks smote them as they came. For a while the din of steel on steel drowned out everything; the masses of men reeled to and fro like two waves that come together and swirl and strive against each other.

The deadly stabbing swords of Rome took their toll at last, and the broken ranks of Cære melted and stumbled away and were gone. But now, as he looked around, Marcus was aware of a gulp in his throat; the circle was small, spears had struck death into the children and the animals in the center, and— Cæso Fabius lay quiet. His father—dead.

"Form up, form up!" Cossus had taken charge. Stentor had uttered his last roar. Rufinus sat tying up a grisly wound across his chest. The three hundred had shrunk. "Form up! Barricade, lads—pile 'em up! Quick about it!"

PANTING, exhausted, bleeding figures broke into action, snatching at the dead and dying alike. A barricade arose as though by magic—corpses three and four high, and more pitched atop them. Marcus gave no sign of the tearing, searing grief within him; he was schooled for such a moment.

Rufinus joined him and Cossus.

"Looks as if the family is breaking up," panted Cossus. "Not many left now."

"Look!" said the redhead, gasping a little. "Here's Tarquinii advancing—the Tarquins trying to conquer Rome, eh? Cossus! You've forgotten something."

"What?" grunted grim Cossus, wiping blood from his sword-hilt.

"One of the family must get away, for two reasons. First, to take the news to Rome. Second, to perpetuate the family of Fabius."

"Send that boy of yours," growled Cossus.

"He's already preceded us," Rufinus said coolly, with a gesture toward the group of women and children, half of them dead or hurt. "Send that cub of yours."

They turned and looked at Marcus. He glared angrily at Rufinus.

"Hell swallow you, redhead!" The words rushed from him. "Here's Rome, said my father, and I say the

same. I stay here with you. Rome is here!"

Cossus reached out and gave him a buffet over the ear.

"Learn respect for your elders, brat! Lift your hand in the air and swear—obey me!"

"I will not," snapped Marcus. His uncle gave him another buffet.

"You cub! Must I strip you and put you over my knee in sight of everybody? Obey, or by Romulus I'll do it!"

Scowling, Marcus lifted his hand.

"Swear," said Cossus, "to obey me. Swear by your father's shade!"

"I swear," muttered Marcus.

"Very well. See that you do, or Cæso will come back from Hades to hunt you down with the Furies. At the next attack, slip down over the river-bank into the water and swim downstream, and come to the city."

"Why must you cast shame upon me?" cried Marcus furiously. "I'm a man, not a boy! I've blooded my sword. I've killed three already—"

"Listen," said Cossus. "You see this army? It's not just the men of Veii—it's made up from the whole Etruscan league! They finish us off and then march on Rome. Well, the gods help Rome if no warning comes! You must take the word. That's a man's work, lad. Get it into your hot head. Aye?"

Marcus swallowed hard. "Aye," said he.

Cossus held out to him an iron ring. "There's your father's ring; I took it from his hand. Wear it."

Voices were pealing at Cossus. A herald was advancing from the enemy. The serried ranks of Tarquinii were on the left, waiting. The standards of Perugia and Cortona showed above the mailed lines to the right. The herald halted and shouted:

"Fabians! Men of Rome! We offer you life."

"Better to die like Romans than live like Etruscans," spat out Cossus; and a yell of wild delight went up from the circle behind the rampart.

Trumpets blew, and upon that shattering breath the ranks came hurtling.

"Remember your oath," said Cossus, and leaped to his post.

Marcus watched and waited, in cold fury and shame. Yet he had sworn, and he knew Rome must be warned, though everything in him rebelled at such duty. Now the battle-yells pealed, and again the din of clanging metal rose upon the sunlight. At one side Cortona broke through the circle; mailed figures were stabbing and killing among the children and women that remained, till the Fabian fury turned on them, wiped them out, and the gap closed. That barricade of corpses saved them but momentarily.

Sword-arms were weary. Fresh ranks of enemies drove in to meet exhausted

men. The Fabians were dying. Rufinus, leaping the barricade, flung himself among the foe; his red head showed for a moment or two, then he was gone to join his boy.

"Marcus!" It was the voice of Cossus, and the grim veteran hurled the word. "Go!"

Marcus gestured assent, and turned, with dragging step.

Now it was the last stand. Here the circle was broken, and there. Most of the women were down, for they had no armor and fought like avenging furies. No quarter was asked or given. About Cossus was a great swirl of Etruscans. His helmet was gone. A bronze ax lifted and drove down; and Cossus was gone under the swirl. All along the line death was smiting fast. Little knots of men were dying on their feet, striking as they died, taking toll as they fell. But they were falling.

Marcus, with a sob, threw off his tunic and slid down the bank and took to the water, but he still held the Etruscan sword as he swam.

So it died out behind him that bloody knoll with the three hundred and six of the Fabian family and their wives and children—it died out upon the morning, and the boy who was to keep the name alive, even to the day when Fabius Maximus in a later age was to save a greater Rome from a greater peril, swam down with the tide to the wooden bridge across the Tiber, the bridge built in sections so that it could be taken apart quickly and leave the river to defend the young city upon its little hills.

There lingered only those low hills against the sky, like a symbol; and then they too faded with the rest, and the wide screen was only a shifting play of formless colors.

A LONG breath broke upon the room as men relaxed.

"By God, we've seen something!" said an awed voice upon the silence. "I remember that story of the Fabians—it's in the second book of Livy!"

"He gives a different version," spoke out another. "What we've seen is the story told by Aulus Gellius—"

"Who the hell cares?" cried a young fellow, lifted out of himself, sweat on his face, and his eyes blazing like stars. "*Rome is here!* Did you get that? And I say the same, by heaven! *England is here!* Here! For we're England—and where we die is England!"

Cosgrave looked around and met the gaze of Lundgren—and read the unuttered thought in those grave, intent eyes of his friend. Rome—England—America: what did the name matter? The thought was the same as that of the Fabian who struck his sword into the earth where he would perish: "*Rome is here!*"

A Lady



AS time went by, the Mad Mulranneys were not so often together in the 89th Street house. We were all in the war; and when upon leave, the girls took up our time. Picasso had his Karen, Matisse his Dolly; El Greco had Ellen Devow and I was getting ready to marry Patsy Caspar. Only Cézanne the fencing champion and Gauguin of the weights and bai-bells scorned love.

But when I came home at last for a long week-end leave from the Coast Guard, Mother said: "The house is full of people. There is a girl, Tommy. You'll have to stick around. . . . The worst is probably about to happen."

"Oh, you know Father and new girls," I said. Father had just finished "Nude in Battle," and I was examining it. At first I thought it was a patriotic daub, but the thing got hold

of you. The brooding woman over the torn field, the juxtaposition of lovely flesh and corpses of young men contained a depth which approximated Father's earlier paintings. The color was fiercely authentic.

Swings Her Right

The screwball Mulranneys riot through new excitements in this story.

by Joel Reeve



Mother said, "It's not Father—although he's smitten too. It's Goggy and Cezie. . . . They've both fallen for this Margeret Davis from Augusta, Georgia. . . . Have you ever known any Southern girls, Tommy?"

"Not white ones," I said. "You don't like this one?" Mother is the loveliest, kindest, most understanding woman who ever lived, still as beautiful as when she was Father's model.

"She has such queer relatives," Mother said. From upstairs came noises of music and laughter and thudding feet. "Goggy is destroying the furniture, showing off his muscles. Cezie grabs umbrellas, and fences with imaginary dragons come to carry off his Margeret. You must do some-

thing, Tommy. You're my only clever son. You must straighten them out."

"You cannot straighten out a Mulraney," I said. "You may relieve a kink here and there, but that is all. . . . Why did you ever marry Father, anyway?"

Mother relaxed, and grinned at me. "In those days, Tommy, he was one hell of a guy!"

"One-tenth as good as he thinks he is today?" I asked.

I had made up my mind about "Nude in Battle." It was extremely good, and I wanted it for my own. Or at least I wanted a chance to make a commission on the sale if Father wished to dispose of it. The price would be very high, and there was a matter of seven thousand dollars I would need to buy a house for Patsy Caspar and me far from the maddening Mulranneys.

Mother said: "You've got to do something, Tommy. Such strange people! When you boys are away, Father gets lonely and brings in characters."

The noise from upstairs grew louder. Patsy came down and greeted me with a kiss. Patsy has long, slender legs and large brown eyes and silken hair like an angel. She said: "You must come up and meet Margeret Davis, darling. She is really something!"

I went up. Gaugin, huffing and puffing, was balancing a heavy chair by one leg, holding it in two fingers of his left hand, the muscles bulging in his Navy blues (which are black, of course, and why do they call them "blues"?). Cézanne was sneering at his brother's display of strength. Father was at the phonograph, talking earnestly to a girl.

SHE was a slight girl, and at first I did not seem beautiful. But when she spoke in her charming Southern voice, or when she moved or smiled, she was as attractive as a spring breeze, a summer sunrise, an autumn moon. There was a graciousness in her, and generations of fine living behind her. The wrists and ankles of this girl were exquisite modelings by a master sculptor, and for once I did not blame Father for devouring her with his painter's eye.

She said to me: "You're the clever one, aren't you? I love Patsy already. . . . Have you met my uncle and cousin?"

The uncle's name was Mordecai Brock, and his daughter was called "Freedy." It was a distinct shock to know that they were related to Margeret Davis. Mordecai Brock wore thick glasses, and his eyes were black pools beneath shaggy unkempt brows. He was a giant of a man, hairy all over. He had a small mouth in a big pie of a face. He wore the gaudiest sports clothes I have ever seen, and enormous tan-and-white shoes.

Freedy was almost as tall as her father. She peered through spectacles, those new, cat-shaped kind, which

gave her the appearance of a terrible cartoon. Her limbs were shapely, her waist narrow, but she had enormous shoulders. She was a man-woman, something like a werewolf, I thought. That she should be cousin to the lovely Margeret was fantastic.

Mordecai Brock said in a voice like muted thunder: "So you are Thomas Hart Benton Mulranev! I've heard of

Cézanne said in my ear: "Give me a break, Tommy. Goggy muscles me around: Father talks her ear off. I've always been your pal, Tommy—"

Cézanne is next youngest to me, and we've always been sort of close. He's very slight, but strong as steel wire, and he is the best man with loils



I tried to give him the pronged fingers, but he slid aside and hacked at me with a small black jack.

you from Chad Williken. You're a sharp article. You know paintings—and finance." He was not being humorous. He seemed to be challenging me.

Father said, "H'rump! Have you seen 'Nude in Battle,' Tommy? I sold it to Mordecai today."

Freeddy said: "I'm jus' so pleased! It'll be so fine over ouah mantel! It's so wonderful!" She talked like a li'l ol' Southern flower. It was ridiculous.

I congratulated them perfunctorily. I was angry, first at Mordecai Brock's attitude, second that the painting had gone before I could get into the deal. I wondered how much Father had sold it for. He is notoriously susceptible to blandishment by acquaintances. If Brock had got "Nude in Battle" cheaply, I would be extremely unhappy.

Father said: "Take them in and show them the paintings I keep, Tommy. You know the lot better than anyone else."

He wanted to talk with Margeret. I knew he was urging her to pose for him. There was a quality about her which would attract any artist.

in the world. He had been made a full lieutenant after Guadalcanal, when his ship was shot from under him in the sea engagement. I said: "All's fair in love and war. Get a lighter chair and beat Goggy over the head with it. You're pitiful Romeos!"

I led the Brocks into the back room on the second floor, behind the rum-pus-room. Father kept his choice canvases there, and as we had just been forced to repair the house after an accident with a small bomb, they were in fair order. I boredly showed them "Nude in Barnyard," "Nude over Osceola," "Nude Escaping Cook County Jail," and some of the others which were the finest and most valuable of Father's many costly jobs. Freeddy burbled and gurgled and showed her ignorance every time she opened her mouth. Mordecai Brock was silent, but his eyes, peering through the thick lenses, ate up every painting.

He was, I realized, an art fanatic, one of those rare persons who respond

almost physically to good things in painting, music, literature. His grossness concealed the fine perceptions which rode him like Furies, so that he drooled mutely and revoltingly within. Such people usually have no balance.

I explained about Father and his careless, swift, prolific way of working, and how he went through periods, always reflecting the American scene, and how this made him important, but that it was not what made him so damned good. Mordecai nodded and finally spoke. "I'll give a half-million for the paintings in this room."

I said: "That's a lot of hay, but Father could get more from the museums if he would sell."

Brock said: "I know why he doesn't sell." He turned abruptly and left the room. Freeddy immediately moved closer to me and said: "They're all nude! Your father is naughty!"

As I am the runt Mulranev, weighing about one-thirty, the sight of this Amazon moving in upon me was panic-making. I executed a ballet step, got past her without being caught, and managed to hypnotize her through

the door and into the rumpus-room. she chattered: "You've just got to come to Geo'gia and visit with us and see all the wonderful paintings Poppa has collected from all over the world! You can ride my hosses and we'll just have a dandy time!"

I said: "I'm scared of horses, and the Coast Guard seldom gets down Georgia way. Excuse me—"

Gaugin finally was tired and dropped the chair, catching it on his foot, flipping it over and bringing it to the floor soft as velvet, a very difficult feat with a forty- or fifty-pound object. Cézanne was desperately trying to outtalk Father, a hopeless task. Margeret Davis was smiling gently upon them all. Patsy rescued me, and Freedy pounced upon Gaugin as the victrola played "I Love You," forcing him to dance. Gaugin would rather have held the chair all night.

MOTHER came in, and Mordecai was rumbling at her and drinking Scotch, rare as it was, by the tumblers. He was getting quite drunk, as the hours sped by. Cézanne finally got Margeret away from Father and danced with her. Gaugin was sweating, hooked by the giant Freedy. Cézanne was very happy.

At one o'clock Mordecai was barreled to the ears. His voice rose, and he said to Father: "I'm givin' you a check for twenty-five thousand right now. I'll want the picture on Monday, after the check is authenticated downtown."

Father said genially: "That's all right, old man."

Margeret, looking fragile and demure between the two big people, prepared to go. Cézanne and Gaugin moved to escort her down the steps and got jammed together. I maneuvered past them and walked to the door with the girl as her relatives lingered for raucous good-nights.

The porch light was on, and she suddenly looked small and frightened. She said quickly: "Mordecai is a strange man. . . . I never knew him well. . . . They live away out in the country. Freedy has grown too big, or somethin' . . . I'm sorry Mordecai got drunk."

I said: "Don't worry about anything."

"But I don't understand," she said. "Twenty-five thousand is about all the money he has in the world!"

"It's a good investment," I assured her wryly. "I could get thirty for it very easily."

"Oh," she said. "I see." Her mouth tightened; she started to say more. But the people came behind us, and they bore her off toward the Avenue, Mordecai weaving a bit, but ably supported by his muscular daughter, whose shrill laughter floated back. . . .

Strange people, indeed! And upstairs Cézanne and Gaugin were arguing bitterly until Father had to get into it, and then the din was terrific. . . . Patsy and I wooed in the corner of the narrow downstairs hall of our brownstone house. . . . Things quieted, and I finally took Patsy home. . . .

I had to walk back. It was three when I entered the house and proceeded softly up the stairs. The dim bulb in the hall showed that the door to the room in which Father's paintings were stored was half open. I reached to close it, then stepped upon impulse across the threshold.

I snapped the light-switch, and light flooded the room.

The vacant frame struck me squarely between the eyes. I stood staring. There was no doubt about it. "Nude over Osceola" was gone, vanished.

I sat down on a chair, my hands damp. That picture was worth over fifty thousand dollars. Father never would insure anything. The thief would have a time disposing of such a well-known canvas, of course—but it could be done.

Or even if no sale could be arranged, the thousands of things which could happen to an oil painting bore in upon me. It was lost—that was the thing. One of Father's really great works was gone!

I thought immediately of the fanatic, avid Mordecai Brock. He was a man who could steal a painting he wanted. There was no question of that in my mind. I began remembering the evening, checking back in my mind. The Mulraneys have trained memories, as well as trained muscles.

Nothing seemed suspicious then. I had been in the same room with Mordecai at all times. It was impossible that he should have removed the tacks from the frame, rolled up the canvas and tucked it beneath his revolting, voluminous sports jacket without my detecting it. I arose and started for the stairs to wake the Mulraneys sleeping on the third floor.

Then I had another thought. I took the empty frame and placed it carefully out of sight behind "Nude with Gin Bottle," Father's Prohibition classic. The Mulraneys seldom went into the little room. Father was not a man to linger over past jobs. Canvases were a dime a dozen in our house. It could be several days before Osceola would be missed.

I went upstairs and tiptoed past the bedrooms of the others. Our house, like all those 89th Street jobs, is deep and narrow. My room was at the end of the hall. I paused outside my door and listened to the deep snoring of Father. My mind was working at full blast, but getting nowhere. I went in and closed the door, and lay upon the bed in my uniform trousers and shirt.

It had to be Mordecai Brock. He was a fanatic, a man who would go to any length to own an object of art which he coveted. He had purchased "Nude in Battle." He could legally resell it—at a profit. Then he would have his money, and in addition the precious "Nude over Osceola," which he could hide away in Georgia to gloat upon at his leisure. There was no question, from the start, in my mind. Mordecai was guilty.

But how? Again and again I re-tracked in my mind the events of the evening. Neither Mordecai nor his horselike daughter could possibly have appropriated the painting without my remembrance of their absence from the rumpus-room. How could anyone extricate it from the frame between the time I displayed it to them and the time they weaved off into the night?

I finally gave up, undressed and went to sleep. . . .

Sunday afternoon I thought about Margeret Davis. Gaugin and Cézanne had taken turns calling her at the apartment which Mordecai kept downtown, and each time Freedy answered and said that her cousin was out, or unable to come to the phone, or was taking a bath. Whereupon Freedy cut loose with blandishments and cajolings that forced my brothers to hang up and pretend to be cut off by the operator. I know, because I was downstairs in the hall, in the nook Patsy and I use for wooing, listening in on the extension.

I remembered that Margeret, dancing about with the boys, had several times disappeared into the rear of the house where Mother had a small powder-room. I thought very hard about this even while Patsy was helping me keep watch on the telephone in our cool and private corner.

Margeret Davis was the last person I had ever known who could be suspected of burglary. Yet she lived with her two dour relatives, and seemed in some way dominated by them. Her quiescent grace, her very demureness might be, I thought, a result of fear inspired by Mordecai. If through fear she could be managed into conspiracy—I hated to think of it.

Mordecai himself called about five. He asked for Father. He made some trivial remarks about the weather, assured Father that he was feeling fine despite too much Scotch, and reiterated his desire to pick up the painting the next afternoon. Then he stalled around some more before he hung up.

NO one had gone near the room where the paintings were. I wondered if Mordecai was trying to learn whether the theft had been discovered. I had already found him guilty. If the Mulraneys were people who went

to the police, I believe I would have taken out a search warrant for his apartment. I thanked my stars that I had leave until Tuesday, and played with Patsy. Sunday went away. Gauguin and Cézanne were inconsolable because they hadn't seen nor spoken with Margeret.

Cézanne said to me: "You've got to help me, Tommy. . . . It's that brute of an uncle. He won't let us see her. He's got his painting—or at least he has made the deal; and now he keeps Margeret from us. She refused to pose for Father."

"Is that bad?" I asked.

Cézanne went away, and Gauguin sought me. "I'd like to get my mitts on that Mordecai. The big ape used Margeret to worm his way in here, and now he's stalling us."

I said: "Don't be a lousy loser. Margeret is twenty-one, and if she wanted to see you, she could."

Gauguin said: "You got to help me, Tommy. I got to see that girl!"

I didn't say yes and I didn't say no to either of the lovelorn Fabulous Brothers. I waited. Patsy stayed that night in the room belonging to Picasso and El Greco, which was far down the hall from my cubicle. Night fell, but there was no sleep for me.

ABOUT two in the morning I heard the noise. I had been expecting it. I slipped into the hall in my dark trousers and an old blue T-shirt, barefooted. Like all those old houses, ours had a skylight. It was at the end of the hall, with a trapdoor and a folding set of steps which went up and remained out of sight, between the ceiling and the roof.

The stairs were down. Someone had removed the glass skylight and was entering the hall. There was another man about to follow. One was tall and wide, the other short and stocky.

I could see little of them in the dim night light, and besides, I was moving very swiftly toward them. As I passed the room where Gauguin and Cézanne slept unhappily together, I gave a double rap with my knuckles which shook the panel. It was an old trouble-signal from our childhood.

The short man was already in the hall. He whirled, and I saw a tough, scared face, entirely unknown to me. He ducked his head without a word and met my charge. I know a thing or two about brawling, and tried to give him the pronged fingers, but he slid aside and hacked at me with incredible speed. He used a small blackjack, a limber article which caught me and sent me against the wall, bouncing.

He was the quickest heavy man I ever met. He kept coming at me, and although I kicked him off once, he was right back, harassing me with the

blackjack. I took a couple which almost dropped me, trying to get in one blow with the edge of my hand. It was a strange duel, neither of us striking out like pugilists, both seeking through tricks to down the other.

I lost all track of the second figure, the big one. I had my hands full with Mr. Shorty. He had longer arms and could hold me off. I used my feet a lot. It was a very even battle, except that he had the blackjack, which hurt me several times.

Then a door opened and Gauguin's heavy voice said: "Hold him a sec, kid. I'm comin'!"

I was waiting for that. I dived in and under, reaching. If Gauguin ever got his paws on this character, it would be just too bad. Goggy doesn't notice things like blackjacks, and his hands are like bear-traps.

Cézanne called: "Pin him to the wall, Tommy!"

I tried hard enough. But Shorty knew a thing or two. He slapped me on the back of the neck as I attempted to hit him with the flying tackle. My nose skinned the hall carpet. My man disappeared.



Gauguin fell over my legs. Cézanne piled on top of us for one precious second.

I yelled, "Down the stairs!"

Cézanne was quickest to extricate himself and fly down the steps. Below we could hear pounding feet. As I joined in the chase, limping, the front door opened and banged shut. I stopped on the second floor and waited until my unsuccessful brothers returned. They found me in the room where Father's paintings were stored.

GAUGUIN said: "They had a car. There was a third guy, and the motor was running and they scrambled."

"What makes, Tommy?" asked Cézanne.

I showed them the empty frame which had contained "Nude over Osceola." It was lying in the middle of the floor. Nothing else was missing.

Cézanne said: "The first one came down and went right to the picture he wanted—"

"This was partly an inside job!" said Gauguin.



I had to take a chance on the gun in Freedy's hand. I leaned away from her, then kicked, as in ballet.

Mother and Father were coming. Patsy crept white-faced to touch my bruises. Father bawled: "My 'Osceola! You let them get my 'Osceola! I'll murder somebody! I'll boil 'em in oil! Who the hell stole my 'Osceola?"

Mother led him away, frothing. Patsy whispered: "Was it that Mordecai Brock, Tommy?"

"No," I said flatly. "He was not inside the house. Neither of the thieves could have been Mordecai."

"He cased the joint," said Gaugin fiercely. "He set this thing up. He's a rat. I never liked that guy."

"Let's get him!" said Cézanne. "Let's go over to that apartment and face him! He's holding Margeret incommunicado."

They raced to get dressed, full of fire and ginger. Patsy said: "You're hurt. . . . Don't go. . . . I'm afraid of that Mordecai Brock. . . . He's such a villainous big man. Call the police, Tommy."

"The police wouldn't help," I told her. "Going to Brock's place is no good. We want that painting back unharmed."

Gaugin and Cézanne poured into the hall, buttoned into gray work uni-

forms. I blocked their way. I said: "You two Navy Lieutenants better simmer down. It wouldn't look good if Brock called a copper on you. . . . Suspicion isn't enough to go upon. You can't crack into a man's home and bully him just because you think he was behind a robbery." I did not tell them the painting had been missing since Saturday night, because nothing would have stopped them if they knew that.

Gaugin said: "You mean he's going to get away with it?"

Cézanne said: "You know damned well he's behind this."

"Certainly he's behind it," I agreed.

"Then let's go!" said Gaugin. "I'll tear him limb from limb and play a tattoo on his gizzard with the bloody bones!"

"He'll harm Margeret!" said Cézanne. "He's a madman."

"You can't barge in there tonight," I said. "You'd get into trouble. Shore Patrol would get you."

Gaugin said: "I'm goin'!"

I have battled all my brothers a dozen times, but I can only make a running fight, and I knew Gaugin would chase me all the way down to Brock's apartment. Cézanne hesitated, but big Goggy came right on. I played my last card. I called, "Mother! Stop these lunatics!"

Mother came, in flowing robes, like the beautiful angel she is. Gaugin stopped dead, regarding me reproachfully, as though I had played an unfair trick. Mother said: "You big goons scam off to bed. Tommy has more brains than both of you put to-

gether. This thing will require head-work. I can't do it; your father is bellowing like an ox, and with as little sense. You are frightening my Patsy. Go on—beat it!"

I said quickly, "Not to bed, Mother. I want to talk to them."

She said: "Okay. Then talk. But you two do as Tommy tells you, or Mamma will spank." She grinned at them. My brothers have not the faintest respect for me, or for Father, or for anything else except the United States Navy. But when Mother speaks, as she seldom does, they walk the chalk-mark. She said: "I knew something was going to happen, and asked Tommy to take charge. You two Casanovas better hop aboard Tommy's wagon, or you'll lose your girl."

THEY wilted like a pair of overgrown blossoms, and filed into the rumpus-room with Patsy and me. Patsy had only a light nightgown, and I hastily covered her with a Navajo rug from the wall. We sat and looked at each other.

I said: "All right, don't get sore. . . . I had to call Mother. I want to do this right."

Patsy said: "The painting might get harmed, you goons!"

Cézanne swallowed hard and said: "Okay, you little shrimp! Carry on." Gaugin grunted his grudging assent. The Brothers are so accustomed to being champions that it is tough for them to acknowledge me, the youngest of them all, as a leader.

I said: "I agree that Brock stole the canvas. It is loose, off of the frame. Anything could happen to it. Our problem is to get it back unharmed."

"Steal it back!" said Gaugin with gusto. "You're right, Tommy!"

"Fine thing," I said. "Inexperienced as we are, we'd be sure to get caught."

Cézanne said: "He won't give it back!"

"That character wouldn't give you the sweat off his brow," said Gaugin. "I'll bet he can't be bluffed, either."

"But he can be handled!" said Cézanne menacingly. He had one of his foils down from the wall and was practicing passes.

I said, "Tomorrow afternoon Mordecai will come for 'Nude in Battle.' I believe Freedy will come with him. But Margeret, having served her purpose, will be left at the apartment. That's your chance to call upon Margeret."

Gaugin said: "The kid's right! We'll tear the joint to pieces and find that painting while Brock is here."

Cézanne said: "Why, sure! That's fine! Tommy, you're the ace thinker. all right!"

I said: "Okay. Now you can go to bed. . . . And if you don't find 'Osce-

ola' tomorrow, bring Margeret here anyway, will you?"

They said enthusiastically: "You bet!" They went to bed.

Left alone, Patsy and I nuzzled a moment. Then she said: "You don't expect they'll find 'Osceola' tomorrow, do you?"

"Nope," I said.

"You're a funny Tommy," she smiled. "Now you go to bed. I'm not dressed for polite necking!"

I went to bed. Mother had given Father a sleeping pill. She came in and sat beside me for a moment. We didn't say much. We never have to. Mother is pretty wonderful.

NEXT afternoon we found that Brock's check was good and were awaiting him. Gaugin and Cézanne were staked out across the street, ready to take off downtown as soon as Freedy and her father arrived. Father kept saying, "Nobody does anything about getting back my 'Osceola'! Do I have to go to the police?"

Mother calmed him somewhat. A cab drew up, and the Brocks dismounted. They were still wearing those awful sports outfits. They came up the stairs, beaming, without a care in the world. I let them into the hall myself. It was very crowded in the vestibule as those two huge people went by me. Freedy was cooing in top form. Brock's deep eyes gleamed with anticipation. He boomed: "Can't wait to get my hands on that picture! Happiest moment of my life! You're a great man, Mulraney."

Father said: "I'm a sick man—"

I cut in: "We've had a sad occurrence. Someone stole 'Nude over Osceola.'"

We were in the parlor. Mother sat quietly in a corner, watching over all of us. Father, wild-eyed, his mop of hair disarranged, walked the rug. Mordecai said almost politely: "I'm sorry, sir. . . . Thieves, you say?"

I stood in the doorway. Freedy looked moronic, staring through her ridiculous cat-glasses. Brock gave me his full attention. His gaze had solid force behind it.

"A thief," I amended. "A clever one."

"Broke in through the skylight," said Father. "Cut it neat as a pin. . . . Two giants. . . . Tommy fought them, but he was too late. If Goggy had waked sooner—"

"One was a professional thug, a real fighter," I said. "He'd had Army training—Marines, maybe. He was good."

"The other was the thief?" asked Mordecai. He was as wary as a cornered lion, now. His eyes bored at me.

I thought I heard a noise behind me in the hall. The front door hadn't opened, and Manassa was in the back.



Margeret brought up a fist. It landed square on Freedy's chin. She said: "Freedy even as a kid, had a glass jaw."

rattling pots and pans like always. A stair-tread creaked. That would be the one halfway down, which I knew so well. It was the only one which gave off that squeak. There had been another entry through the skylight.

I stepped into the parlor without looking over my shoulder. I wondered if I had made a big mistake in sending Gaugin and Cézanne down to Brock's apartment. I said: "The other one was supposed to give the impression that he was the thief. . . . But the painting which was stolen had been missing since Saturday night. No one entered this house Saturday night—excepting you and your daughter and niece, Mr. Brock!"

The board creaked again; therefore the intruder was waiting for something, lingering halfway down the staircase. I made a half-turn but still refrained from looking, which was very difficult. Patsy was upstairs in her room—or she had been.

Mordecai Brock was extremely calm. He said: "I see. . . . You've got my check, but I haven't got 'Nude in Battle.'"

I said, "'Osceola' is worth twice the price of 'Battle.' It is an established masterpiece. It has hung in every good exhibition in the east. . . . Furthermore, anyone who could steal 'Osceola' may return at any time and make off with other paintings. It is a bad situation, Mr. Brock. The thief is extremely clever."

"Anyone who can steal a picture

from under the nose of the Fabulous Mulraney is indeed smart," nodded Brock. "Have you any ideas, Thomas Hart Benton Mulraney?"

He had never liked me from the start, and his voice contained barbs dripping with venom. I nodded at him. "I have ideas like mad. I'm pretty sure who stole the picture. What I don't know is its present whereabouts."

THERE was a small silence. Mordecai Brock looked pleased with something or other. Father was looking from one to the other of us, trying to grasp the situation. Mother was very still in the corner.

I said: "You didn't take 'Osceola,' Mr. Brock, because you got yourself swacked on Father's Scotch whisky. . . . I thought your niece had extracted it from the frame, at first, because she had the best opportunity. But she didn't do it."



Mordecai Brock raised his voice to a roar. "Be careful of your accusations. Mulrancy the Least! I'm a hot-tempered man, and I can take care of myself, and you too!"

Father snorted. People who think of Father only as an artist who paints nudes sometimes get terribly shocked when he goes into battle. He had finally got his teeth into something, even if it was only a threat directed at me. He lowered his shaggy head and set himself.

I said rapidly: "But Freedy the nit-wit also went twice to the powder-room. Freedy is too much of a li'l ol' Southern magnolia to fit her size."

I CAN move quickly upon occasion. I went across the room and snatched at the slanting eyeglasses. They came away in my hand. Freedy jumped to her feet.

It was such an amazing transformation that for a moment I was held stock-still, looking at her. She had the

strongest woman's face I ever saw. Her green eyes were deep, like her father's, but they were cold and calculating and menacing. Her entire appearance changed as she stood, a good-looking woman, cold as ice, poised as an athlete. She said in a deep voice totally unlike the one she had been using: "Don't anyone move!"

Behind me the stair creaked once more. There were other sounds. I saw Brock moving to block the doorway into the hall.

I had to take a chance on the gun in Freedy's hand. It was a small automatic, but it would kill at that range. I leaned backward, away from her. Then I kicked, as in ballet, with my right foot. At the same time I twisted my body and landed facing the door. I saw Mother come off her chair and yelled:

"Take Brock, Father!"

Father needed no urging. The gun in Freedy's hand flew into the air, ex-

ploded with a tiny plop, and one of Mother's Sèvres vases shattered on the mantel. Father hit Brock with his shoulder, knocking him away from the door.

I was through like a rabbit. The stocky man was almost out of the house. I nailed him with one hand, swung him and tried to grapple with him. The canvas was in his hand, that blackjack in his right. He said sharply: "I'll rip the pitcher to hell!"

I had to step back. I had dragged him into the hall, and was between him and the vestibule. I said: "Okay, pal. It's a Mexican standoff. You can't get out, and I can't stop you from spoiling 'Osceola.'"

He said: "Over your dead body I'm goin' out!"

HE started forward. I heard Father belting Brock around; through the door I had a glimpse of Mother. In her hand was the mate to the shattered vase. She was at that instant, clopping Freedy on the skull with it.

I said: "Your boss just got pasted, chum. What good is the painting to you? The Brocks'll never appreciate it after we're done with them."

He would not look over his shoulder and give me a chance to take him. He was even tougher-looking than I remembered from the previous night. He had no neck at all, and his chest was like a barrel. He said: "I'm takin' the pitcher outa here."

He started forward, poised and ready for anything. The blackjack quivered in his grasp. I was terribly handicapped by the rolled canvas in his other hand. If I did the wrong thing, it would be ruined forever.

I yelled: "Father! Out here! He's got 'Osceola!'"

Father said: "Damn this big fella! He won't go down!"

Mordecai was proving a handful. I saw Patsy creeping down the stairs, very pale, one of Cézanne's fencing foils in her hand. I was getting panicky. Patsy could easily get hurt. I said to her: "Get back! I'll handle this. Don't stab him!"

He still would not turn around. Mr. Shorty was a thug with a single-track mind. He wanted out with "Osceola," and out he was going. I stepped aside just as he reached for me with his handy little weapon. I said: "All right. You win."

He still kept his head. He sidled past me, alert. I had hoped to take him on the steps outside, snatching the painting. But he held it safely, backing down the stairs. There was a powerful, battered old car parked two doors away. It was broad daylight on 89th Street, but not a pedestrian was in view. Shorty said: "Watch yourself, kid. I gen'ally get what I go after. This is the kiss-off."

He hit the sidewalk, still watching me, still clutching the precious painting. A red cab came skidding to a stop. I hollered with relief. Gaugin and Cézanne piled out in front of the house, Margeret between them. I shouted, "There's the thief! Get him!"

Gaugin made a flying leap. Shorty sidestepped him, and made a pass with the roll of canvas which was "Osceola." I almost wept. Cézanne got in my way. From behind came a cry. It was Freedy. I might have known a china vase wouldn't stop her.

"I'll shoot you!"

She was wild-eyed. She was coming toward us like a runaway freight train. Shorty promptly passed "Osceola" to her as we checked at sight of the gun she had regained. She said: "Get going. . . . You know where!"

Shorty started to go. Gaugin, who was nearest, thrust out a toe. Shorty went stumbling. Cézanne hit him with a left hook and drove him into me. I used a bit of judo and tossed him at Freedy, who was making for their car.

Freedy's gun went awry again. I said: "You should be more careful of weapons. They explode!" I grabbed her.

Gaugin took Shorty on the rebound. Hoisting him, he dropped the stocky man on his head. At that, Shorty bounced up and tried to kill Gaugin with the blackjack. He failed.

I had Freedy's arms locked, but it was a hell of a job. She was as strong as a horse. Margeret Davis slid in front of her as we struggled. Margeret said in her soft voice: "Give me the painting, Freedy."

The big girl was trying to rip the canvas, but I kept spreading her arms. I was behind her, holding her elbows.

Freedy said, "You—your little devil!" She gave a terrific lunge. Margeret, that dainty flower, stepped in as Freedy burst loose from my grasp.

I WENT forward. Margeret brought I up a fist from her hip. It landed square on Freedy's chin.

I grabbed for the painting. It fell loosely into my hand. I stood, staring, scarcely realizing that I had regained the precious jewel of the Mulraney fortune in canvases.

Freedy was on her hands and knees. She was wagging her head, and her jaw hung slack.

Margeret rubbed her knuckles. She said reflectively: "Freedy is a bit crazy—and awful strong. But she always, even as a kid, had a glass jaw. . . . Honey—are you all right, dear?"

Freedy said: "I'm—all—right."

I said: "Then let's go indoors before the neighbors and the cops get into our hair."

We even took Shorty in with us, and Mother bandaged his head where the

curbing had cut it slightly. Mordecai Brock looked as though a threshing machine had run over him.

I said briskly: "Well, you can have 'Nude in Battle' now, Mr. Brock. . . . We won't try to prosecute Freedy. She'll claim insanity, kleptomania, the statute of limitations and dozens of other cute things. . . . There's just one thing I want to know. Where did you leave the painting after you took it off the frame?"

Freedy, wilted, said nothing. Mordecai Brock said: "She does these things for me. She knows I love paintings. She gets into these messes and I have to get her out."

"You may or may not be a liar," I said. "Where did you hide it, Freedy?"

She looked up, and behind the lackluster glance she may have been faking was a tiny gleam. She said: "In your room!"

"You meant to get out of my room last night and regain it," I nodded. "But the Mulraney put up too much of a fight, so you went down and dropped the empty frame in the middle of the floor to make it seem a midnight robbery. . . . You were covering details nicely. But you see. I went downstairs with you three Saturday night, and knew you didn't have a canvas concealed about you."

She said: "You know nothing—" "I know enough to frisk people Mother doesn't like," I told her. "Your old man was too drunk and your clothing is too tight to allow concealment of anything as big as 'Osceola.' You've got nice legs, at that. . . . Too bad you're a nut!"

She came off the chair, fighting mad. Margeret Davis said softly: "Take it easy, Freedy. He can hit you on the chin, harder than I!"

Mordecai Brock said hoarsely: "We'll go. If you'll return my check, you can keep 'Nude in Battle.'"

I said, "Yeah, I thought so. You can't afford to buy it. You'd have to sell it. . . . And you thought you'd have 'Osceola' for free. . . . It's a strange man who'll let his daughter take a rap for him."

Father handed him the check. They went out. Shorty staggered a little. He was a hell of a fighting man, that one. They got into the battered car and drove away.

I said: "Well, we seem to be stuck with Margeret, the punching magnolia blossom!"

Mother put her arms around the girl, fending off Gaugin and Cézanne, who had the same idea. She said: "This child will stay with me until she decides what to do."

Cézanne and Gaugin glared at one another. Their leaves were up that night. I could see Father preening himself. Maybe there would be another Mulraney painting soon.

What A

Dealing with Germany

I AM thinking about our service-men—particularly those who have written in to this column. The expression of their hopes and dreams touches and inspires me, but their undying conviction that they fight for a better world, a world in which there will be always peace and never another war, upsets me. It upsets me and causes a great lump to form in my throat, because I'm afraid, so awfully afraid, that after they have done their magnificent job, the treaty-makers and the peacemakers and the American public may fail them. Not intentionally, of course, but rather through ignorance of some of the vital factors which will determine whether the next peace shall be final and enduring.

I do not fear Japan. I believe that we are perfectly capable of putting her in her place. It is the German situation that worries me. We thought we settled it twenty years ago, but it seems we made some terrible mistakes, and we shall do so again unless we acquaint ourselves more thoroughly with the *German mind*. In this intangible substance lurks the greatest threat to the future of mankind.

We are fighting for democracy, and what our leaders envision is a sort of world-wide democracy which would include not only our allies, but our present enemies as well. In our country so much has been said and written about the advantages of democracy that we are practically convinced that any one of the conquered countries, and the people of Germany as well, would welcome a democratic form of government. This is an extremely fallacious point of view, and one which can lead to very serious repercussions after the war and eventually to another world war. We must get to know our German enemy better psychologically before we attempt to impose peace terms. I was in Germany over a year prior to the outbreak of World War II. I lived in and among typical German families; I mingled with students and professors at two of the largest German universities. Everywhere I went I encountered a universal antagonism to democracy. A democracy was always referred to as an "enemy" democracy, one of those great catastrophes, from which Hitler was supposed to deliver them. In substance, a democracy was an enemy simply because it represented the ex-

Do You Think?

Readers' Forum

act counterpart of their own totalitarian state.

I once attempted to discuss the advantages of a democracy with a group of university students, and was literally laughed out of the conversation. Explaining the democratic way of life to them was like describing the Einstein theory to a five-year-old child. The little pseudo-specimen of democracy they experienced under the Weimar Republic has left a worse taste in their mouths than Nazism ever will. The Germans are that way, that's all.

"Your democracy is good in theory but poor in practice," the ten-year-old son of my German landlady once told me with all the certainty of a hoary philosopher. "It sounds good, but doesn't get you anywhere in the end. Our form of government may not sound so pretty, but it accomplishes things."

All my talk about the ends not justifying the means met with a frigid reception. One cannot get the average German excited about democracy.

So it will be a great mistake—when we smash through their tremendous fortifications and march victoriously into Berlin—for us to think that because we come as the champions of democracy that the *great bulk* of the German people will welcome us with open arms or look upon us as their saviors. It would be a still greater mistake to think that defeating them on the battlefield will be enough to win them away from Hitler and over to the side of democracy.

The Germans cannot shake off twenty years of anti-Semitism, looting, lying, spying, torturing and murdering, at a moment's notice. What-

ever fine instincts they once may have had, have long since been benumbed by their thorough schooling in cruelty and tyranny.

After our military victory over Germany has been won, what will be our next step in dealing with the German people? As I see it, our next step must of necessity be a *process*, a most arduous one, and one that will require many, many years. This process should be the reawakening, re-educating, and reconditioning of the German mind.

If we fall short of this final objective, then shall our boys be called upon again some twenty or thirty years hence to reap the harvest of bitterness and hatred which Hitler has sown. In the present condition of the German mind lies the greatest threat to our postwar world, and unless we deal with it wisely, Hitler and his powers of darkness will triumph in the final round and our boys shall have fought and won another world war in vain.

Vincent L. Miles.

The Battle of the United States

EVERY soldier, sailor and marine is a traveling Chamber of Commerce. Here's what I mean:

A half-dozen or so brand-new soldiers get together, still smelling of mothballs and with size-tags sticking here and there on the freshest of uniforms. One asks, "Where are you from?"—and *bingo!* the fireworks begin.

No geography book, travel folder or advertising layout can compare with the descriptions G. I. Joe, the civilian-soldier, can concoct for his home State.

A South Dakotan, who at home probably cursed grasshoppers, drouth and blizzards, goes to amazing lengths to portray the glories of the Black Hills. A Californian who may have never attended a movie or caten an orange, goes overboard plugging those items in his State. Kentuckians boast of horses, beautiful women and squirrel-shooting, and Washingtonians of scenic mountain drives. Minnesotans talk about the U. of M.'s great football teams and their thousand lakes. If they're from Florida, climate is their dish. Texans brag about Texas.

And so it goes, day in day out—the "Battle of the United States." After attending even the most meager number of bull-sessions, an observer soon

learns that there are forty-eight "best" States in the Union—with a few plugs thrown in for Chicago and Brooklyn.

To hear a man in his own habitat talk like that is a little out of the ordinary; but get him away from home, and he becomes a walking travel agency.

Now this is the problem—though we admit there are more serious ones in postwar planning: What if every Boston ballyhooer or Sacramento soap-boxer turns loose his barrage of adjectives on the natives of every foreign country whom he meets during the war? If he does, Frenchmen, Bulgars, Egyptians, Javanese, Norwegians and hordes of others will be clamoring to live in his Utopia. I tell you, it may take the Army, Navy, Marines and the whole Notre Dame football team to quell the immigration.

Sgt. Bob Karolevitz,
Camp Wolters, Texas.

The Great Day

FOR twenty-eight months I have been overseas. Almost all of that time has been spent in tropic Australian and New Guinea holes. I am, I believe, qualified to speak for all the boys who are serving and those who have served here with me.

What I have to say is not of any great importance; this letter is not an attempt at revealing the thoughts, feelings and future outlook of every man here; it is merely a reminder of the gravity of this war. Leave out the brass bands, the fancy editorials, the cheers and huzzahs: let's get down to the wonderful day this war is over—the day arms can be dropped, for what I hope is forever.

Some will agree that this day is certainly precious; but by their own plans for observing it, they become hypocrites. They speak of the wine that will flow, but they forget the blood that has flowed; they talk of merry dancing, but they forget the weird dances of death executed by men riddled by bullets, or trapped in blazing airplanes, or that of innocent civilians dangling at the ends of ropes. Holiday. Carnival! And after years of blood, filth, disease, suffering, fear.

Perhaps they do not stop to think. Perhaps they think a wild celebration rightly befits this day. Whatever the reason, it is a direct insult to those who have fought and died—who are now fighting and dying. Can you imagine the dead, if they could be resurrected for that one day, and finding it a mad orgy—would they feel their sacrifice worth it?

I know of one soldier who, no matter where he is when the news of peace is received, will gratefully and humbly thank his God.

Donald Haring.

BLUE BOOK is glad to receive letters from you, our readers, telling us what you are thinking about—about your business now or your career after the war; the war's effect on you or those dear to you; or if you are in one of the Armed Services, a letter which would interest your fellow-readers on your recent experiences or expectations for the future—these within the censorship regulations, of course.

We will pay twenty-five dollars for each letter bought by us. The author's full name and address must accompany the letters; but, if he prefers, initials only may be used for publication. No letters will be returned. All letters submitted will become the property of McCall Corporation. Address: "What Do You Think?" Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.

AN AMERICAN OFFICER ELOPES
WITH A PERSIAN PRINCESS
WHILE HER FANTASTIC FA-
THER ENTERTAINS HIS GUESTS
WITH GAUDY STORIES OF HIS
OWN WEIRD WICKEDNESS.

by William
Makin



WE'RE going to a party
given by the most notori-
ous character in Tehe-
ran," said Bentley, wrap-
ping a rug about his long legs as we
settled in the car.

"After reading a history of the
Shahs, I'm prepared to be tolerant,"
I said. "Who is our host?"

"Prince Mohammed Kerbela," said
Bentley, as the car leaped forward.

"Decidedly we are honored."

"You don't know his reputation."

Flight from Teheran



"Is it bad?"

"Excessively so."

"And yet you accept the invitation?"

"Everybody does—at least, those fortunate enough to secure one," Bentley chuckled. "Apart from his notoriety, he is immensely rich, possesses the finest collection of Persian carpets I've ever seen, and is a most knowledgeable man to talk to on the poetry of Hafiz and Sa'di."

"Anything else?"

"Ah, yes; he has a most beautiful daughter."

"Altogether a man of many assets," I said, gazing out of the window at the flickering screen of the Teheran streets. "May one ask how he became notorious?"

"At the age of twelve, Prince Ker-bela murdered his mother," said Bentley, quietly. "He explains that she

dared to object to the woman he had decided to marry."

"At the age of twelve!" I repeated.

"He poisoned her," said Bentley. "Perhaps he will relate the story again this evening if he considers you sufficiently interesting. Prince Kerbela has told the story many times. He tells it charmingly."

I GAZED quickly at Bentley; but the ambitious Second Secretary of the British Legation was serious.

"And after the murder of his mother, did he marry the woman of his choice?" I asked.

"No; he ignored her. After all, she was only a peasant woman who had been brought in to nurse him as a child. He went to Europe—Monte Carlo, Paris, Deauville—and amused himself in spending much of the fortune he had inherited. After some years he came back to Persia and married the daughter of a rich landowner. His wealth was further increased. Then the daughter, Mahi Manzar, was born."

"And shall we see the Princess Kerbela, his wife?"

Bentley shook his head.

"No. She disappeared several years ago, soon after the birth of her child. No one knows what happened to her. I should not ask the Prince about his wife."

"I think I'm going to enjoy my first Persian party," I murmured.

I had sensed myself curiously alert ever since I came to Persia. Teheran seemed a place where some highly dramatic event was sure to happen. For the past three days I had been awaiting it as I went about my mundane duties within the walled compound of the British Legation. There comes a time when even wars are dull affairs of daily routine. Perhaps a jaded feeling had given rise to absurd expectations.

But the stage itself was set. The snow-topped range of mountains, with the ice-cone of Demavend rising in the clear sky, provided a dramatic backcloth. There was the champagne air of this tableland of Asia, raised four thousand feet. And the characters who crowded the stage were as varied and sensational as any that could be gathered together in this global war. I felt that the main characters should be speaking the magnificent blank verse of Shakespeare, instead of the ordinary small-talk of diplomats and soldiers mixing over whiskies and sodas.

Apart from the leaders of the United Nations—Marshal Stalin, Mr. Churchill and President Roosevelt—who conferred in villas beyond which armored cars and machine-guns squatted like sleeping beasts with one eye opened, there was a constant cavalcade of high-ranking officers in brilliantly decorated

uniforms, dogged by insignificant men in shabby clothes. The latter were, for the most part, secret police. They loafed about the grounds of the Russian Embassy with one hand lost carelessly beneath their rusty coats, and their furtive gaze following any unfamiliar figure.

I had watched the Russian sentries guarding the conference-room. They were picked Soviet officers. They stood in the same stiff, unmoving attitude for hours on end. On one occasion, returning after three hours' absence, I found the same khaki-uniformed, blue-trousered Soviet officer straddling in the same attitude, with a tommy-gun beneath his arm. His Slav features regarded me with the wooden indifference he would have shown to an insect crawling the wall.

And the rumors that circulated! They added to one's expectations. There was the whisper that the Nazis had parachuted agents into Persia, and that a little secret army was converging on Teheran. Security officers dashed away into the country in high-powered cars. Intelligence officers took command of Teheran's broadcasting station. I saw something of the precautions surrounding the kitchen where an American chef prepared the President's meals. I watched the inscrutable Stalin stride along the gravel drive, his long camel-hair coat down almost to his heels. And I knew that the shabby men hidden away among the trees clutched their guns a little tighter, warily watching individuals such as myself.

Yet as the days passed and nothing happened, I decided that it was necessary to escape from behind those high walls, those watchful sentries, and the screen of armored cars. Perhaps the sensational events I expected were happening in Teheran itself. And when Bentley, Secretary at the British Legation, suggested that I accompany him to one of the many parties being given in the town, I promptly accepted.

"So many parties are going on," said Bentley, "that one might be pardoned for thinking the Persians were celebrating a peace instead of a declaration of war against the Axis. But here we are!"

We had arrived at the palace area of Teheran. Here the high walls, tiled domes and mosaics gave me an impression of the Forbidden City in Peking. I saw that we were less than a hundred yards from the old palace of the Shah. In that marble mausoleum, where the Peacock Throne reposed, a former Shah had been bored into fat and flabbiness. Yawning at his harem, he fled to Paris. There, in a luxurious apartment on the Champs Elysées, he had frolicked, indifferent to the rise of a usurper in Persia. Fol-

lowing the abdication, the usurper had built several modern palaces near by. In between were the little marble palaces of the Persian nobility. It was toward one of these, hemmed in by automobiles, that we now stepped.

"Alms, for the love of Allah!"

The ancient sob in Persian came to us from an old crone who drew a tattered *chadar* of printed cloth across part of her face. Her hand was held out greedily. We ignored her.

"*Feringis*, I beg of you to save me from starvation."

I had discovered that the beggars of Persia were the most rapacious, the most persistent whiners in all Asia. They sobbed and cried as though their hearts were breaking. The appeal only ceased magically in the scramble for the thrown coin. Bentley was hardened to their arts. He walked on, indifferently.

"You cannot leave me here to die," sobbed the woman, seizing my coat with one hand and keeping her *chadar* half across her face with the other. Then, surprisingly, she broke into French: "Have pity on me! I am hungry and desperate. I too have a right to enter this house. I am no ordinary beggar-woman."

I stopped, at that. I thrust ten reals into her palm. Her mouth worked, convulsively.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am the Princess Kerbela," she laughed, harshly.

The next moment she had completely vanished.

Bentley was impatiently calling to me. I followed him up the marble steps of the little palace. We entered a hall, glittering with mirrors that reflected the light of chandeliers. A madhouse for anyone susceptible to claustrophobia! Attendants in Persian costume were receiving the cloaks of the ladies, the heavy military coats of the men, the overcoats of the diplomats. Mirrors reflected everyone a dozen times. I scrambled up the red-carpeted staircase, comforted that the stern Presbyterian outlook of Bentley was unaffected by this splendor.

AT the top of the staircase Prince Mohammed Kerbela received his guests. His daughter stood by his side. My bow was a perfunctory one, for the Prince attracted immediate attention. An eaglelike gaze flashed from the somber eyes. A hooked nose jutted forth from a long but handsome face. He seemed to have swooped down from the mountain-tops to stare contemptuously at the people of the plains.

With his immense height, he suggested a tribal chieftain, a leader of bandits on foray. But a chieftain in evening-dress! The white tie and shirt-front emphasized his dark, som-



ber appearance. His tail-coat was exquisitely cut; the black pearl studs were fantastically valuable. His garb was the apotheosis of that hackneyed word, *immaculate*. Altogether with dark casque of hair graying at the sides, he suggested also a great player, stepping on the London or New York stage. And when he spoke, it was with the rich, vibrant voice of an actor.

"I am the Princess Kerbela," she laughed, harshly.

"I'm delighted you were able to come. Mr. Bentley tells me you're a writer. We must have a talk later in the evening. Meantime, permit me to present my daughter."

I turned, with some reluctance, to Mahi Manzar, a pretty, wild girl with oblique eyes. She wore a red eve-

ning frock which set off her shapely shoulders and olive complexion to full advantage. She held out a slim hand.

But it was to the Prince that I again turned my gaze. I recalled Bentley's statement that this man, at the age of twelve, had poisoned his mother! He looked capable of it. And the hands, those slim, sinewy hands which he held out in greeting to his guests, they were suggestive of dark deeds: a

strangler's hands. They fascinated me. At the moment they were toying with the decorations on his breast.

In excellent English he welcomed a group of Americans who had just arrived. Among those in uniform, with the arm badge of the red scimitar and white star on a blue background, was the military attaché, Captain Robert Browne. We nodded to each other, but Browne's nod was perfunctory. He had turned eagerly to Mahi Manzar; she responded with a shy smile and a slight flush on her olive cheeks.

was frowning down upon them. He was about to say something, but turned impatiently as a footman whispered in his ear. A murderous gleam came to those somber eyes.

"Send her away!" he said angrily. "See that she does not dare to interfere with my guests as they arrive. If she does, seize her and put her in one of the cellars."

Then he turned with a smile to welcome a group of elderly Persians panting from their ascent of the staircase. Bentley twitched me away.

"Anyone you wish to meet?"

"Only our host again. Was he serious about that talk later on?"

The Prince pressed one of the panels, revealing an aquarium of snakes. "Behold, my pets!" he said.

"You've kept those dances for me?" I heard him ask.
"You demand so many," she smiled.

"I need them all," he replied boldly. Her fan went to her rouged lips in a warning gesture. Prince Kerbela

"He's always serious. I sometimes think Prince Kerbela lacks a sense of humor."

"He certainly has a dramatic fitness for the rôle you described earlier in the evening."

"Ah, yes, the matricide. You think he looks the part?"

"I should have said pure De Quincey. He would have embellished the essay 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.'"

Bentley laughed.

"He's a hashish-smoker, too. The dilated pupils of the eyes, the sunken cheeks, the sensuous curl of the lips—they all reveal it. By the way, he claims to be descended from an ancient family of the Valley of the Assassins."

"I can well believe it," I nodded.

"But behind that handsome, sinister appearance, he's something of a poseur. Like all Persians, he has an acute sense of the histrionic."

"Nevertheless, a gentleman."

"So was the devil. . . . But I feel like a drink. Come and help yourself to vodka."

FROM the bar and the tables laden with food, I watched the guests talking, eating, dancing, and in a distant room, gambling. An astonishing paradox in the midst of war! I stared at a podgy Persian, whose red face suggested that he might die of apoplexy at any moment, scooping large quantities of caviar between his thick lips. Yet less than a year ago bread riots had raged in Teheran. The fat Persian abandoned the caviar for game pies and a mound of chicken in jelly. He reached with fork and spoon across the table, selecting like a greedy child who knows he is going to be ill, but is reckless.

The Persian women who sauntered in and out of the room self-consciously smoothing their frocks, seemed in perpetual surprise at meeting themselves in a mirror, unveiled. They were, however, eager to dance. Bentley pushed me in the direction of a Frenchwoman married to a Persian general. While we danced on the rich carpet which rose in wool and silken waves beneath our feet, she told me the sad story of her ten years in Persia—in ten minutes.

I listened, indifferently, to a tale of marital infidelities and Freudian horrors. I was attracted to the happy Mahi Manzar. She was dancing with young Captain Browne. I could see at a glance that they were very much in love. The girl's parted, eager lips matched the serious gaze of her handsome partner. Their fingers were gently interlocked. For the American, with this wild beauty in his arms, it must have seemed a long way to Boston and cautious respectability.

I observed a severe-faced general frowning at me.

"My husband," said my partner, following my gaze.

"Tell me, do Persian generals fight?" I asked maliciously.

"Only with their wives," she replied.

"I gather you dislike him."

"So much, that when I am able to return to France, I'm going to divorce him."

"Is he really so bad?"

She raised plaintive eyes in the direction of the chandelier. I smiled. The music stopped.

"May you get your divorce and be very, very happy!" I added.

I left her and sauntered into the gaming-room. Dandified Persian officers, choking in the high-buttoned collars of their khaki uniforms, bent eagerly over a table where baccarat for big stakes was being played. An American and a British officer were among the players. A small group of Soviet officers, always aloof and detached, looked on. I was amused to see that the podgy man with the apoplectic face was holding the bank. Winning, too! Thousand-real notes were stacked at his elbow. He was as greedily intent on the money as he had been on the caviar.

"Who is he?" I asked Bentley, whom I found at my side.

"Another obvious character, a modern Persian profiteer. His name is Assad. He's just made a fortune from selling hoarded wheat."

"He seems in a fair way to making another at baccarat."

"Yes," nodded Bentley. "Luck always comes to those who are rich. He is going to marry our host's daughter."

"To marry Mahi Manzar!"

"Why not? He's had the experience of two wives already, and divorced them. Now he can afford to aim higher with his wealth."

"Does her father, the Prince, approve?" I asked.

"He always approves of rich people."

Even as we spoke, Prince Kerbela entered the room. Such was the overwhelming personality of the man that everybody looked up. He smiled, disarmingly.

"Continue your play, gentlemen. Please do not let me disturb you." At the same time he bent over the fortunate, podgy man. "Assad, I've not noticed you dancing this evening."

"No," nodded Assad, his greedy eyes intent on the cards. "I prefer to gamble when my luck is in, as it is tonight. Please to leave me alone, Prince."

The Prince's handsome face darkened. I thought he would have struck the man.

"You may be losing something that is not so easily won back," he said, quietly.

Assad laughed, carelessly.

"For the moment I prefer my winnings here." He lifted his head at the call of the bank. Twenty thousand reals. "Banco!" he called, and stretched out his fat hands for the cards.

I saw murder in the eyes of Prince Kerbela. But the sudden glint was

gone as he turned away from the table. He saw me standing there.

"Ah, this seems a propitious time for our promised talk. Come along and see my library."

He linked his arm with mine. I felt a strange aversion to him at that moment. I even felt that I was a prisoner.

The library was in a glossy Continental style. It looked rich, even ostentatious. The many books were bound in rich red leather and ranged behind glass panels. The walls were of shiny wood halfway to the ceiling. There was a curious hothouse atmosphere pervading the room.

"Take the easy chair," said Prince Kerbela, with a gesture. He had seated himself at a modern desk. A lamp flung its light into my face. His own features were lost in the shadows.

"A comfortable room," I observed politely. "Do you work here, Prince?"

"I find it a place where I can think and observe the antics of my mind," he said. "I trifle occasionally with verse, but only occasionally. I find poets, the Persian in particular, suit my bitter-sweet moods. Do you know the verses of Hafiz and Sa'di?"

I shook my head.

"I'm afraid my knowledge extends only to the translation of Omar Khayyam."

"A mountebank," he said. "A great mathematician, but not a great poet. Not to be compared with Hafiz. Let me try to give you in English a couple of lines from our greatest poet:

*'Not all the sum of earthly happiness
Is worth the bowed head of a moment's
pain—'*

His rich, resonant voice declaimed in an almost theatrical manner.

"You believe that?" I asked.

"Of course," he nodded. "And I've never hesitated to follow the philosophy in my daily life. I believe in buying happiness, whatever the cost. Observe the rug on which your feet are resting. A tribal rug in the Bokharan style. I think you will agree that its coloring is unusual."

I GAZED at the blood-red carpet with its twisted, tortuous design in the thick pile.

"I saw that rug one day when I was among the nomads, the people of the black tents," went on Prince Kerbela. "It had quality, but its coloring dissatisfied me. The khan who displayed the rug admitted that the dyed wool lacked depth. But he said that the secret of the red dye was known only to one old man, who lately had failed to produce enough for the tribal weavers."

"I asked for the old man to be brought before us. When the cringing creature in rags appeared, I asked if he would produce more of the se-

cret red dye. He quivered and mumbled, but at length said that he had forgotten the formula. He was not lying. His mind was wandering. All the gold I could offer him would fail to stir his chilled memory.

"I turned to the khan and asked if I might buy the old man as a serf. A price was agreed upon. Just as the old man was turning to go, I stopped him. I ordered him to stand on the rug. He did so, a miserable object in his rags. Then I took the khan's sword and hacked at the fellow. Blood spurted all over the carpet. He fell to his knees. I finished him off. The body was left on the rug for a day. As you see, its color is now all that could be desired by a connoisseur."

I STARED not at the rug but at the speaker. His features were hidden in the shadows beyond the desk lamp. But his eyes stared out, sardonic and acutely. I felt that he was experimenting. The irony was too obvious. I looked around the room. The portrait of a heavy-jowled woman, whose severe features penetrated the bad artistry, frowned down upon me from the opposite wall.

"That was my mother," said Prince Kerbela. "I poisoned her, as you've probably heard."

The theatrical tone of his voice irked me.

"I had heard some such rumor," I said, "but naturally, didn't believe it."

"And why not?"

There was a querulous note in his voice.

"Surely, such things don't happen, except in the pages of 'The Thousand and One Nights,'" I said coldly.

"But I assure you it *did* happen. The thing had to be done. My mother refused me the woman I wished to marry—at that moment. Until then, I had always had what I wanted. I secured poison from one of her own maids who hated her. My mother died, three days later."

"You killed her?"

"Yes, I was impatient for my earthly happiness."

"No one punished you for the crime?"

"That was only possible by the old Shah. When he heard of it, he laughed, called me to the palace, patted me on the head and told me to go away and be a good boy in future. I went very far away, to Europe. I wanted to."

"And you had no regrets?"

"None whatever."

He reached out for a box of cigarettes, offered me one and took one himself. He came from behind the lamp with a match held in those sinewy fingers. As he put the light to my cigarette and looked into my face, he smiled.



"I think you are perspiring a little, my friend."

I tugged with a finger at my collar.

"Yes, I find it uncomfortably warm in this room," I said.

"But it has to be," he nodded. "A certain temperature is necessary here so that my pets can live and enjoy themselves."

"Your pets?"

Again that laugh.

"I had forgotten. This is your first visit, and you don't understand." He held up a finger, enjoining silence. "Do you hear anything?"

I listened, a little startled. Somewhere in the distance the dance-band was playing. I could hear nothing else.

"No," I said, shaking my head.

"Listen, carefully!"

It was then that I heard a peculiar slurring sound. It was as though some strange beast was crawling on its belly along the corridor outside. It seemed to approach nearer. He must have seen my face go pale, for he chuckled and strolled toward the wall. He pressed upon one of the shining wood panels, so that it slid along grooves. A glass tank, lit with greenish light like an aquarium, was revealed. Something heavy was pressing against the glass and making that slurring sound.

"Behold, my pets!"

It was an aquarium of snakes. I stared, fascinated at the horrors. They crawled about, their tongues flickering and their speckled bodies surging against the glass, which sent forth chilling little squeaks.

"What d'you think of them?" he asked.

I looked into his face.

"A strange hobby for a man," I said.

"But why not?" he smiled. "These cobras also serve a useful purpose." He looked down affectionately at one which was inflating its hood. "The poison is taken from their fangs, diluted, and injected into me at intervals. I suffer from a nervous affliction,

and modern medicine has discovered in snake-poison a useful antidote against the disease. Oh, you need not feel sorry for me," he went on. "It was a holy disease that seized upon Mohammed. Some of our greatest thinkers have suffered from it. I can tell you that in the moments before an attack begins, we experience an exaltation such as mundane men can never know."

"I think you are the most extraordinary man I've ever met," I said, slowly.

HE laughed delightedly, seeming highly pleased. Vanity flushed his face as though I had congratulated an actor in his dressing-room on a superb performance of *Macbeth*. "A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing." The theatrical theme persisted in my mind. Was I confronting a first-rate actor?

"A great pity that you modern writers shun the sensational, the baroque in modern life. It exists, you know, as much as ever." He quietly slid back the panel. "It needs only another Edgar Allen Poe, a Verlaine, or even a Dumas to reveal it. I flatter myself that I would have been worthy of inclusion among the macabre characters portrayed by those authors."

I shrank back from him. The psychology of the man was showing itself. An exhibitionist in the grotesque! But how far was he telling the truth; to what extent was he lying? And what was the vanity that impelled him to take out his gargoyle of a soul and



I awoke at the sound of Bentley's voice: "There they are, ahead of us!"

display it before me? At that moment I was concerned only in escaping from the library and this handsome sardonic Prince who was towering over me.

"We all have our ambitions," I said. "Even princes," he nodded. Then he turned. There was a discreet knock at the door. "Yes, what is it?"

One of the servants entered. A whispered conversation began. I scanned the bookshelves. As I expected, it was a library of the fantasies—of Gerard de Nerval, Ambrose Bierce, Poe, Alexander Dumas, Oscar Wilde, Heine, and the more obscure German writers. But even as I noted the titles, a sudden outburst from the Prince caused me to swing around. He had changed into an excited, trembling figure. Foam flecked his lips. The servant cringed before the storm.

"I shall kill the man," he shouted in French. "He must die for this insult. A guest in my house, too!"

"What has happened?" I asked.

"The worst!" he almost screamed. "My daughter has gone, fled!"

"But I saw her dancing half an hour ago."

"Yes, cunning little devil!" He staggered toward the blood-red carpet, beating a hand against his head. "I must think, quickly. Something must be done at once. They've taken the road in a car toward Isfahan."

"They?"

"Yes, that smug-faced American youth is with her. He's persuaded her to run away with him and get married. I shall kill Captain Robert Browne."

"He happens to be a friend of mine," I interposed. "I can assure you, Prince Kerbela, that he is a very serious young man, of good family, and will probably make an excellent son-in-law."

The Prince stared at me.

"You talk rubbish!" he said bluntly. He turned to the servant and spoke in Persian. "My compliments to Mr. Bentley, and ask him to come here immediately. Yes, and tell Assad he is wanted."

THE Prince ignored me in the following silence. He paced up and down the room, his hands clenching and unclenching. Then Bentley appeared, mildly surprised, followed by the podgy Assad, who was stuffing notes into the pockets of his tight-fitting suit.

"Mr. Bentley," began the Prince abruptly, "I understand that your car is provided with a diplomatic *laissez-passer* which enables it to go outside Teheran during the present conference."

"That is so," nodded Bentley.

"As a Persian, alas, I am not permitted that privilege for the moment," said the Prince. "Yet it is imperative that I go on the road at once. My daughter has been kidnaped by a scoundrelly guest at this party. I intend to follow the couple and rescue my daughter. Will you lend me your car?"

Bentley raised his eyebrows. I hurriedly explained to him the gist of what I had heard. The Prince waited, restless and impatient.

"Well?" he demanded.

"It's an unusual situation, Prince Kerbela," Bentley said diplomatically.

"It's the unusual that usually happens, Mr. Bentley."

"But there can be no objection to your taking the car," went on the imperturbable Second Secretary, "providing that I am with you to vouch for the journey."

"Good! It's settled," said the Prince. "And we will take Assad with us. After all, he is affianced to my daughter."

Bentley nodded. The Prince had called for a coat. The servant brought one of those elaborately decorated *pushtins*, colored leather outside and warm layers of lambs'-fleece within. A reluctant and protesting Assad was helped into a thin evening coat. I joined Bentley in retrieving our coats in the hall of mirrors.

"You've no desire to stay on at the party?" grinned Bentley.

"Hang the party! I wouldn't miss this encounter on the road for anything. D'you think we can catch up with Browne?"

"If he's using his old Ford, which I expect he is," said Bentley, "we're almost certain to overtake him. Come along!"

The Prince, dragging a sullen Assad, had already passed out by the door.

Bentley seated himself with the driver, while I sat at the back of the car with Prince Kerbela and the podgy Assad, who smelled of caviar and rustled with banknotes. Very little was said during the first half-hour. We passed through the gates of Teheran with its Russian and British sentries, and Bentley displayed his pass.

He questioned one of the soldiers about Browne's car. The soldier remembered an American, with a lady at his side, driving along the Isfahan

road three-quarters of an hour previously. They were in an old Ford. The American had shown a diplomatic pass. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter past ten.

"We should overtake them about midnight," said Bentley, over his shoulder. Then he hunched up his collar and settled down to sleep.

As we hurtled along the rough road headlights knifing the darkness and showing us occasional camel convoys lurching by to a clatter of bells, I tried to squeeze a little comfort for myself at the side of the fat Assad, who seemed to be continually bouncing in my lap. He was querulous, and arguing with the Prince.

"Do you realize that you, the host, has abandoned his party and a number of distinguished guests," said Assad.

"The party will continue," said the Prince. "It always does. Someone insists on having a last drink."

"And my luck at baccarat was at its best," moaned Assad. "I won three banks in succession. I was about to win a fourth when you dragged me away on this cursed journey."

"I presume you still wish to marry my daughter?"

"Yes, but not to chase after her in motorcars in the middle of the night."

"You should have done your duty and danced with your fiancée. Then this would not have happened."

"It would have been criminal to flout my luck at cards this evening."

"Damn your cards!"

After this, they sank into weary silence. The road and bleak countryside, silhouetted in the headlights, flashed past. We were journeying across the roof of Asia, and it was bitterly cold.

I must have fallen asleep, for I awoke with a start at Bentley's voice: "There they are, ahead of us!"

Our headlights had caught the car in full glare.

"Can we stop them?" asked the Prince, leaning forward.

"We shall all have to stop within half a mile. There's a village barrier ahead."

We flashed past the Ford. There was a glimpse of two figures seated in the front. Then our car began to slow down as we approached the chain barrier across the road, one of the dangerous features of night travel in Persia. As we stopped, a man with a lantern came forth from a hut.

"Order him to keep the chain fastened until the other car arrives," said Bentley. "Now I think we can stretch our legs."

We had no sooner stepped out of the car than the Ford drove up. Bentley, the Prince and myself strolled toward it. Somewhere behind I heard

soft cursing as Assad slithered in some camel dung.

"Hello, Browne!" said Bentley casually.

"Hello, Bentley. What brings you away from that jolly party?" said the American imperturbably.

But the girl, wrapped in rugs at his side, shrank back as the fierce, determined face of Prince Kerbela, her father, materialized in the light of the lantern held by the Persian.

"Young man, you and I have an affair of honor to settle," said the Prince in his most theatrical fashion. "You will please to step out of your car."

"Certainly," said Browne. In the dim light of the dashboard, his face was serious. "I'm rather glad of this opportunity to say a few words to you, Prince, before resuming my journey."

"Don't dare to presume—" thundered the Prince.

"Might I suggest, in the chilly circumstances, that we all go into the local *chai-khana*," interposed Bentley. "Your daughter, Mahi Manzar, will welcome a glass of tea after the long drive."

"As you wish," said the Prince imperiously. He drew himself to his full height and marched in the direction of a lamplit doorway. It was the local tea caravanserai, or *chai-khana*, which is always to be found close to the village barrier. The rest of us followed, Captain Browne with his arm protectingly about the girl.

"Robert, I'm frightened!" whispered the girl in English.

"It's the last time you ever will be," he said calmly.

Prince Kerbela strode into the *chai-khana* like a military conqueror taking up his headquarters. He gazed about him disdainfully. A smoking lamp lit up the interior, a miserable affair despite the carpets on the floor, the carpets hanging against the walls, and the carpets covering tables and divans. A few ragged figures, camel-drivers, were stretched out on these divans fast asleep. They snored lustily. One man sat cross-legged his back against the wall and his eyes staring glassily at us, as immobile as a stuffed figure. I sensed that he was a hashish-smoker, far away from his present surroundings. A samovar bubbled and hissed in the distance. From behind it the proprietor shuffled.

"*Chai?*" he asked.

"*Chai*," nodded Bentley, and sat down, warming his hands at the oil stove while the hot tea was being prepared. Like someone who had been forgotten and wished to be elsewhere, Assad waddled into the *chai-khana*. He seated himself close to the stove and lapsed into a stupor.

The tea, in steaming glasses, was brought in on a tray and handed

round with a ceremonious bow by the proprietor. Assad cupped his hands about the glass and began to drink in that noisome and appreciative fashion of the Orient. Prince Kerbela held his glass between two strong fingers, took a sip, and turning to the American, said:

"I demand satisfaction for this outrage."

Browne looked at him sternly.

"I am taking your daughter to Isfahan, Prince Kerbela. We are to be married by the English bishop there. I may as well tell you that whatever you say cannot alter our decision."

"Really," sneered the Prince. "And supposing I kill you before you leave this village?"

"That's a possibility, but most improbable," calmly replied Browne, sipping his tea. He appeared unconscious of the fact that Mahi Manzar was clinging tightly to his arm in her terror.

"You seem very sure of yourself, young man," said Kerbela ominously.

"Because I know you for what you are—an actor, a charlatan, a grandiose liar who desires to believe his own lies."

The Prince took a step forward. I thought he was about to fling the glass of tea in Browne's face. But the American's gaze did not waver. A little foam flecked the lips of the Prince. His eyes glared. Suddenly, he turned toward the podgy figure by the stove.

"Assad!"

His shout startled the figure bent over a glass of tea.

"Yes, Prince?"

"This man has dared to rob you of your fiancée. What do you intend to do?"

"Intend to do!" said Assad. "Why nothing. What can I do?"

"At least you might be man enough to challenge him to a duel."

Assad licked his lips.

"To a duel! Surely you are joking!"

"I'm deadly serious. I ask you, now, are you prepared to fight for this woman who has been promised you in marriage?"

The snoring of the ragged camel-drivers on the divans rose above the tense silence that followed. Assad gave a nervous smile, and thrust a hand into his dinner-jacket, where the bank-notes rustled.

"No, Prince Kerbela," he said ingratiatingly. "I am prepared to marry your daughter, but not to fight for her. I am not a fool."

"You are a despicable cad," thundered the Prince. Assad shrugged his shoulders and turned again to his noisy consumption of tea.

"Under the circumstances," added the Prince, turning grimly to Browne,

"I must fight you myself. I suggest pistols at ten paces. Please arrange for your seconds."

And he turned his back upon the American.

It was at this point that Bentley intervened.

"My dear Prince Kerbela," he said. "I think you are forgetting the unusual circumstances of the war. If you, a Persian, should kill a member of the forces of the United Nations, you will be liable to trial by a military court. And that, I might add, will almost certainly lead to your execution."

"I demand a duel," insisted the Prince imperiously. He realized that he had assumed the leading rôle in a theatrical situation, and was determined to play it for all he was worth.

"On the other hand," pursued Bentley, "if Captain Browne should kill you, then, Prince Kerbela, an unfortunate diplomatic incident would be created. I would strongly urge that this affair be settled in some less sensational fashion."

"You diplomats are too suave where matters of honor are concerned," flashed the Prince. "Permit me to settle this affair like a Persian gentleman."

"Bravo, Prince!" It was Browne, surprisingly, who spoke. "Yes, I agree. A duel is necessary. But not in the manner you proposed—at ten paces. May I suggest a form of duel which will leave the victor free of any liability, and thereby ease the consciences of our diplomatic friends?"

"What is that?" asked the Prince suspiciously.

Browne brought a revolver from his hip-pocket. It was a nickel-plated weapon of five chambers. He jerked it open, and carefully took out three of the cartridges. Only two cartridges were left in the weapon, and these were spaced by empty chambers. Browne snicked it back, and twirled the magazine. Then he laid the revolver on the carpeted table. We gazed in stupid solemnity at him as though he were performing a trick.

"Now if either the Prince or myself should be found here with a bullet through the head and a gun held in the hand," he said, smilingly, "anyone would assume that the affair was a suicide. Isn't that so, Bentley?"

"It depends," said the Second Secretary cautiously.

"But if you also witnessed the suicide?"

"You're not suggesting—" began Bentley.

"Indeed I am," said Browne calmly. He turned to the Prince. "I understand you to mean that by this duel one of us must die?"

Prince Kerbela seemed to have gone a shade paler.

"Yes," he said.

"Well," nodded Browne, "I suggest that one of us puts the revolver to his forehead, and pulls the trigger. Chance may decree that the chamber be empty. Then the other takes the revolver and does likewise. Again the chamber may be empty—or it may not. As you've seen, three chambers are empty; two are loaded. The odds are fairly even. And as I've pointed out, when the fatal shot is fired, the witnesses themselves can faithfully say that it was suicide."

"Browne, this has gone far enough," said Bentley. "Don't be a fool!"

"On the contrary," said the American, "the Prince demands satisfaction. I am prepared to give it to him. Prince, the duel is on. Would you like the privilege of trying the first shot at yourself?"

And with a gesture he indicated the revolver on the table.

PRINCE KERBELA drew himself up. In that handsome face with its glowing eyes there was now a furtive look. Despite his towering height, despite the suggestion of a tribal chieftain in evening-dress, the contemptuous spirit was ebbing away and leaving something insignificant. Once again I thought of the actor; but he was a player who had forgotten his lines, and there was nobody to prompt him. He gazed round at the little group, a mute questioning in his eyes.

"As you've decided the—er—extraordinary terms of this duel," he faltered, "I consider that the first shot should be at yourself."

Browne smiled.

"As you will, Prince. I expected that honor."

Calmly he stretched out a hand for the revolver. He lifted it to his forehead. But at that moment Mahi Manzar flung herself forward.

"No, Robert, no!" she cried. "I will not have this sacrifice. I will go back to my father rather than allow this mad duel to take place."

She struggled to take the revolver from him. Prince Kerbela recovered, momentarily, his self-possession.

But without hesitation Browne twisted her hand away and pushed her aside. She staggered back a few paces, her mouth round with terror. Again the American raised the revolver to his head. Fascinated, I watched his finger curl about the trigger. Then Bentley leaped forward. But he was too late. The finger jerked; the hammer clicked—that was all. The chamber had been empty.

Browne carefully replaced the revolver on the table.

"And now, Prince Kerbela," he said quietly, "it is your turn."

Instinctively we all gazed at the Prince. Even the glassy-eyed hashish-

smoker appeared to have swiveled in his direction. The Prince seemed rooted. The actor's mask began to sweat from his face. The hand that should have stretched out for the revolver was trembling visibly.

"Come, Prince! It is your turn," repeated Browne sharply.

In the ravaged face that was now revealed were many emotions. He was struggling to play his part to the end, to recall the right lines, to overcome the paralysis of fear. His eyes closed, as in a spasm of pain. We saw him then as an old charlatan who had acted all his life, who had entered so completely into his part that he could tremble or shed tears of emotion as if in earnest. Yet at this great moment all his devilish artistry failed him. He bowed his head.

"I can't—I dare not," he declared, and with a sob, turned away.

There followed a silence. The snores of the sleepers seemed louder than ever. Then came a faint sigh, as Mahi Manzar slumped into a faint. Browne immediately went to her.

"I think, Prince Kerbela, you had better go back to your guests and your home," he said over his shoulder.

The Prince, with bowed head, shuffled out of the *chai-khana*. Assad, not forgetting to gulp the last of his tea, waddled after him. Bentley and I remained a moment with Browne.

"She will be all right in a few moments," the American said. "We will have supper here, and then resume our journey to Isfahan."

Bentley held out his hand.

"I would have considered it a privilege to be the best man at the wedding," he said. "But I will have to drive the Prince back to Teheran."

"Thanks," nodded Browne. "I feel rather sorry for my future father-in-law. Please look after him."

"I will," said Bentley. "But tell me, what led you to the discovery that he was a fake?"

"Oh," smiled Browne, "many little incidents and things told me by Mahi Manzar. As a boy in Boston, I used to be crazy about acting, and spent all my pocket-money on secret visits to the theater. I studied the mannerisms of many famous actors, and the stock methods of registering emotions. Only when I met Prince Kerbela and heard him tell his fantastic tales, did I realize that I was listening to the prototype of those old actors."

"Are even his stories fakes?" I asked.

"Magnificent lies," grinned Browne. "He always longed for a sensational reputation. Like the storytellers in the Persian bazaars, he began to believe his own fantasies. All Persians have something of the histrionic instinct; and in Prince Kerbela it is very highly developed. Of course, he never poisoned his mother, as he so often

relates. She died a natural death, and he wept bitterly at her bedside. But he couldn't resist inventing, boyishly, the idea that he was a matricide.

"Once he began, he had to go on inventing and acting. Like the villain in the old melodramas, he wanted only to be hissed by the audience as he stepped onto the stage. It was a natural tribute to his artistry. And he could never resist walking into the limelight with a new and more fantastic tale—rigmarole picked up from Nineteenth Century romances. He had money enough to surround himself with stage props and devices which made the sensationalism seem true. He even cajoled his wife into playing the dramatic rôle of a mad beggar-woman, abandoned by him. You may have glimpsed her outside the palace this evening. But when he had to face real drama, as a few moments ago, he failed. He had to reveal himself—a charlatan."

The girl sighed. Her eyelids fluttered. It was time for us to go. I held out my hand, saying:

"Nevertheless that was a desperate chance you took—pointing a revolver at your head and pulling the trigger."

He chuckled.

"An old college trick. I knew by the feel of the gun that it was an unloaded chamber."

I stared at him doubtfully, but he shook my hand and sent me away. Once again I sat in the back of the car with Prince Kerbela and Assad. A profound silence prevailed. Assad swathed himself in the scented smoke of a cigar. He gave the impression of being content at being alive. The hawk-like nose of the Prince seemed to sink lower toward his chest. After some fast driving, we entered Teheran.

As we reached the little palace, lights were still blazing, and some guests were moving about the rooms. Assad rustled his banknotes.

"Maybe the gambling continues," he said, hopping out of the car and waddling toward the steps.

THE Prince stood at the entrance for a moment. He seemed an old man. His mouth twitched, and there were tears in his eyes. He raised a hand, feebly, as a gesture of thanks, and without a word began to walk toward the palace.

Then, out of the shadows, darted that beggar-woman who had whined at our approach some hours earlier. She was still in rags, but the tattered *chador* revealed the Princess Kerbela. She caught hold of him gently.

"Come along, my dear," she said to him in French. "You look very tired. We must put you to bed."

"Yes, I'm very tired," he said simply. "I would like to go to bed."

We drove away.



"Maybe some day you'll have to travel alone," Jim had said. "It's a good thing to know how to do."

by EDMUND WARE

MAYBE you've heard about my brother, Jim Brett, that they named the fan-wing fly after, but I guess there are some certain things you haven't heard about him. The fact is, there are a few things about Jim I just discovered for my own self, and Jim wasn't with me when I discovered them, either. I was alone, fishing Fifth Machias Stream for brook trout, and it's funny how much you can learn about a person when he isn't there.

Jim and I had always fished together, ever since I was little, except this one time. When we were just kids, Jim about sixteen and I eleven, he would say: "He travels the farthest who travels alone." It's a quotation from Kipling, and the book says "fastest" instead of "farthest," but that's the way Jim always worded it.

Mother used to read Kipling to us, and it was wonderful on those long dark evenings in winter. I can see Jim sitting on his chair, with his chin in his hands, and his elbows on his knees, listening to "The Feet of Young Men," and "Barrack Room Ballads," and "Rhymes of the Seven Seas." They got into Jim's blood more than they

got into mine—but Jim himself got into me in a strange way because of the poems, and because of the long-journeying look that would come into his eyes when we were young, and running white-water in our canoe, or tenting out on the upper Machias watershed in Maine, or fishing side by side.

It was always side by side, right up until this trip I am going to tell about. Once I heard my mother say to Jim: "You mustn't let Tony get too dependent on you. He must learn to do for himself."

And it was some time after that, when we were lugging the canoe around Fifth Lake Dam, that Jim began working on me: "Listen, Tony, 'He travels the farthest who travels alone.'"

"I don't want to travel alone, Jim. I want to be with you."

We rolled the canoe off our shoulders and set it down on the edge of the pool below the dam. It was about all I could handle, in those days, but it didn't bother Jim at all. He put the tent and bedding-roll up in the bow to make up for what I lacked in heft, squinted downriver with his long-journey look, and said: "Maybe some day

Who Travels Alone

you'll have to travel alone. It's a good thing to know how to do."

"Why?"

Jim grinned, and it was like the sun coming out and shining on a dead-water. "Hell, Tony. Are you still asking that question? I thought you'd grown up."

"I'm only thirteen!"

"Okay, get in the canoe and let's go."

WE would pitch our pale-green explorer's model tent on the east bank below Night Dam, where the river drivers used to camp long ago. And we would fish side by side—only this time Jim said: "You take your rod and fish down to High Rolling Tier and then walk back through the burn. I'm going to try up above, with fan wings."

It wasn't the same as being really alone, because I knew Jim was up above, and I knew I could find him. But just the same, I didn't like it very much—except when I was thinking only of the trout.

I took three beauties from the Landing Pool below the big ledge in the long shadows; then it was getting dusky, so I waded fast down the long

straight run to High Rolling Tier, and from under an old maple top that quivered in the current, I took one that weighed a pound and a half. He was cold and hard and quick in my hands, as I reached around and slid him into the creel. Below, I heard the somber rumbling of Smooth Ledge Falls, and I looked up into the sky, and it was almost night.

Suddenly I wanted to get back to the tent. I wanted firelight, and I wanted Jim's voice, and the security of Jim himself. I had learned that you can be lonely even in a country you love, and know well. It's like being half-afraid, and half-sad, and it makes you hurry, and it makes you whistle, when you don't feel like it.

I climbed out of the stream where the bank rises almost sheer. It's still cross-piled with down timber from the old 1928 burn. Up on the hossback I peeled off my waders and put on the moccasins I'd tied to my belt. I hung my waders and wading-boots on my creel harness, and started up the trail, half-seeing it, and half-feeling it with my feet. Up there, with the night wind blowing, I heard a loon calling from clear down on Fourth Lake, and it made me want to get close to Jim more than ever.

When I reached Night Dam, I looked down off the high bluff, and across, and Jim was just lighting the fire.

I slid down the steep, gravelly bank, and walked over the dam, being careful on the old rotting logs. Then I came into the firelight, and I tried not to sound too glad to see Jim, because he would think I wasn't able to be alone—and I guess I wasn't, not that time.

I opened my creel and slid out the big trout I'd teased from under the maple top, and Jim said: "Whew!"

JIM fried the trout in cornmeal, and had boiled potatoes and a can of green beans, and some peaches. Then the wind died out, and the mosquitoes came, so we got into the tent and closed the mosquito bar, and turned in.

"How'd you like it?" Jim said, when we'd switched off the flashlight, and the fire flickered bluish yellow on the tent inside.

A night-hawk dived for some kind of insect, and pulled up out of the dive, making that shivery-sounding *who-o-o-o-o-m* with its wings.

"It's better when you're with me, Jim," I said. "I can look across the





stream and see you, and I can talk to you, and ask which fly to use."

I know he was pleased, because his shoulder touched mine under the blankets; but he yawned, and said: "You'll learn, sometime."

"Learn what?"

"Let's go to sleep."

"Jim—you suppose there's a couple of big ones in the Island Pool?"

"Shut up and go to sleep, kid."

Jim could always close his eyes, settle his head back on his folded pants, and be asleep in two long breaths. But I couldn't. I lay awake listening and thinking, always—sometimes even at home, if Jim wasn't there, when I was little.

That night I heard an owl, and the water coming through the broken places in the dam, and a porcupine rustling around in the young popples that were coming in tall now, after the burn. The sounds didn't scare me. It wasn't that. They just made me feel closer to my brother Jim.

The next day, like all the other swell days on Fifth Lake Stream, we took a fair catch of trout, mostly on

dry flies, and ran down the last mile below Hell's Gate into Fourth Lake. At the lower end of Fourth, we carried over into Dobsis Lake, and Cliff Lewis, who owns the Pines, towed us up to Bay View where we had left the car. And that night—like all the other nights—my mother broiled the trout for us on the coals in the kitchen stove, and we hung around sniffing, and our mouths watering, while the twilight came down across the mowing behind our farmhouse, and Ed Button, the hired man, came ambling toward the barn talking nonsense to the cows.

"Ma," Jim said, "you going to read tonight?"

"All right. If you want."

"Read the one about 'the feet of young men,' and how they want to go to far places in the spring of the year. You know, Ma—one part goes: 'Have you heard the steaming stillness of the orchid-scented jungle, where the—the—' You know the one."

MOTHER looked in a new way at Jim, as though she had an inkling, somehow, that he was restless, and would travel. And when she read the poem that night, there was a funny change in her voice, but Jim didn't seem to notice. He just sat there with his teeth showing a little, staring at the light, and dreaming.

It was only a year or two after that trip when Jim got a registered guide's

license. I don't think he was quite nineteen, but he was good, either in an eighteen-foot canoe in quick water, or on the lakes with an outboard. He knew his stuff, and the sportsmen liked him; and one of them—Mr. Blackwood—took him on a trip clear across Canada. Another man, Mr. Kenyon, from Boston, took Jim down to the Sportsmen's Show, and he won the guides' fly-casting tournament. That was the winter Jim tied the fan-wing with the slate-colored wings, and black hackle, yellow mohair body, and golden pheasant tail. Mr. Kenyon called it the "Jim Brett," and wrote an article in a magazine, with Jim's picture. Mother was sure proud. When she opened the magazine and read about Jim, her face got red, and she said: "Look here, Tony! It's Jim! It's really Jim!"

"Do you suppose Jim saw the article?" I asked.

Mother just smiled, and said: "I don't know, Tony. Are you going fishing this month?"

The month was June, the June of last year. "I don't think so," I said. "I don't want to go alone."

"He travels the farthest, who travels alone," my mother said, and it knocked me for a loop, because it sounded so much like Jim that it was as if he were standing there, kidding me, the way he did all those other times so long ago.

So I said: "Well, all right, maybe I'd better go, at that."

And I went, too!

I went alone, using our old outfit and canoe, and in some ways it was the finest trip I ever had. I lugged across from Sabio into Fifth Machias Lake, and made it in one trip. Jim would have got a laugh, because if he'd been there, he'd have remembered the other times, when I would wobble around, buckling under just one end of the eighteen-footer.

THE weather was perfect: warm, with high clouds, and the blue above them, and the wind small. I saw a doe with a spotted fawn on the big, horseshoe-shaped sand beach by the outlet, and they white-tailed it into the brush as I slid along, paddling easy.

Below the upper dam, and on below the long deadwater, I came to the rips and let down slick and fast with the setting-pole, and it all came back how Jim would sing out in the bigness of his spirits every time the pick of his pole hit a rock, and then recite a line from "The Feet of Young Men"—about "the click of shod canoe-poles round the bend," and, "a raw, right-angled log jam at the end." I don't remember the words quite right. It was Jim's voice that got you so excited it seemed as if you couldn't be scared of anything. That's what to remember—his voice.

It was funny—that first night in the tent, without Jim. I didn't feel alone at all, and I couldn't quite understand it. Maybe it was because the old camping blankets still smelled a little bit of the woodsmoke of past trips. Or maybe it was because Jim seemed to be there. Like while I was building the fire. I seemed to hear him say:

"Don't burn hemlock, Tony. It throws sparks."

I used hardwood instead, just as if Jim had really said that. And later, lying in the tent, I heard a funny crying noise, sharp and clear from the river-bank, below.

"What's that, Jim?"

"Otters. They're down there playing."

But the next day it was wonderful. I'd ease the canoe into shore, step out in my waders, and fish up a half-mile or so. I didn't have to ask which fly to use, because I used Jim Brett fan-wings, and nothing else. No wonder Mr. Kenyon wrote that article about them. Jim had tied these a year ago especially for me, with gamecock hackles, and they'd float in fast water like a cedar chip.

"How long a leader shall I use, Jim?"

"Not over seven-and-a-half. The water's fast enough to bust up the glint, and that length handles much better."

In the churning eddy below Smooth Ledge Falls, I laid a cast in the black shadows under the far bank, and saw the bronze-red side of the trout as he boiled up. I tightened my wrist, and the line ripped off the water, sending up a fine spray, and it tautened against the strength of the fish.

"Yee-ow! See that one?"

"You haven't got him yet, Tony!"

"Oh-h-h-h, yes, I have. Steady, baby—easy now. Get away from that snag, honey-pie. Aw—"

"Go ahead and say it, Tony."

So I stuck the broken end of the leader in my mouth to keep it soft while I was getting another Jim Brett out of my case, and I said what Jim wanted me to say; and through my half-compressed lips, with the leader-

end tickling my tongue, it sounded like "mom-mammit-tho-ell."

While I was tying on the new fly, the trout cleared the surface, with the fan-wing plainly visible in the side of his jaw. I gave him a wave as he went down, and wondered how long it would take him to rub the fly loose against the stones.

I set the canoe down the straight stretch with the pole, and the pole sounded nice, clicking on the stones. I stepped out again just above the Island Pool—the last good one before you come to the lake.

The river widens out, and right in the center, at the lower end of the wide part, a great gray lichen-covered boulder splits the stream. Directly behind the boulder there's a shoulder-high growth of fir, and a big maple that droops down and shades everything.

Right above the boulder, the current picks up, and it isn't really white-water, but it's so fast it sings in the grasses along the banks, and you can just stand against it, wading. I was casting downstream, and I wanted to use a bucktail, but I stuck to the Jim Brett, casting slack, and got a pretty good drift on the fly.

I TOOK four trout in half an hour, and they were identical—each one thirteen-and-a-half inches long, bronze sides, crimson bellies shading off into white, and clean-lined as anything you can imagine.

"There's no pool like an old pool!" I seemed to hear.

That was one of Jim's favorite remarks, and I laughed out loud, and it must have sounded funny to hear a fellow laughing that way, all alone on a trout stream six miles from the nearest human being.



I don't know why I laughed—but I had begun to feel the way Jim always felt, and I understood him better, and felt closer to him than ever before—even closer than in the tent, when I was little, and would wake up and press over, touching him to get the feeling that nothing was coming after me to hurt me.

ON down below, in the canoe, my basket of trout cradled in ferns, I began yelling bits of the poems he loved—and I suddenly realized why he loved them, too. I yelled out a line from "The Grave of the Hundred Heads"—"A Snyder squibbed in the jungle; somebody laughed and fled—" And another line from "The Rhyme of the Three Sealers," where: "They hit Tom Hall with a bursting ball, a hand's breadth o'er the knee."

It wasn't the war that suggested those particular lines. It wasn't the lines themselves, or the meaning of the words, but it was the sound of the words, the way Jim used to repeat them. That's why I wasn't alone any more, and I can't explain it any other way.

Out on Fourth Machias Lake, in the cross-chop, the wind tugged at my hat, and I saw the deserted cabin on the high bluff, and imagined Jim out front, with his hands cupped to his lips, imitating a loon call. He'd have the loons crazy, and they'd swim in to within ten yards of shore, talking back to him, and maybe wondering why a human being had any right to get so close to their language, and still not be able to fly, or swim very far under water, or lay a couple of large olive-colored eggs in spring.

And I could feel the way Jim did when he saw a buck sailing through the down timber, and his rifle came up fast, and the shot ripped open the stillness and echoed back and forth in the rocky shores; or when he drifted downstream in the canoe, and the black ducks kind of bounced ten feet off the water into the air, and Jim doubled with his Parker sixteen, and sat there still, while the water smoothed out and the feathers drifted down.

I understood a lot of things that Jim had told me, and it hurt a little to have to learn them the hard way, but I quit thinking about that. I was sweating under the canoe and pack on the Fourth Lake Carry into Dobsis, and then I was cool on the big lake while Cliff Lewis, who owns the Pines, towed me up to Bay View.

I hoisted the canoe onto the roof of the car, and Zealie Smith helped me with the lashings. I got home about dark, and Mother had the stove going so there'd be coals to broil the trout.

"Any luck, Tony?"

She asked it the way a man would, or as if she were a fisherman, and once

she told me how she had liked to fish in the meadow brook when she was a girl.

"Sure," I said. "You bet."

"How was it, Tony? How was it, your first time alone?"

"It was swell. I didn't feel alone at all, Ma. Not even last night in the tent."

"That's good. That's the way it ought to be. I guess you've learned."

"Sure—a lot. A whole lot."

I cleaned the trout on an old plank out back, and brought them in, and my mother put them in the broiler with some pieces of salt pork to keep them moist and add flavor. I watched a little while till the pork began to drip onto the coals and sputter, and flame up, and lighted my mother's face. But then I went into the living-room and lit the lamp, and picked up the magazine that had Mr. Kenyon's article about Jim, and Jim's fan-wing fly.

I must have looked at the picture and read the words under it a hundred times, but I read them again:

"James Brett, Maine guide, designer of the Jim Brett fan-wing, now Pilot Ensign Brett, U.S.N. As we go to press, we read in the newspapers of the tragic death of Ensign Brett, somewhere in the South Pacific."

I guess my brother Jim was right about traveling the farthest when you travel alone; because you're alone, when you're flying a Grumman Wildcat off the deck of a carrier, the way Jim did. He dived his plane deliberately into a Jap bomber that was flying low toward his carrier; I wonder if maybe he thought then of the night-hawks diving over Fifth Lake Stream, and how sweet it would be to hear the sound of the pull-out, only he couldn't pull out of this one. He had to let her go on down into exploding darkness—

I WENT out into the kitchen after a while, and my mother had the trout on the table, and I looked out the window, and it was just light enough for me to see Ed Button coming up toward the barn, talking to the cows.

"Sit down and eat, Tony," Mother said. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Sure—you bet."

I sat down, and slid my knife along the trout's back, split it open, and lifted out the backbone.

"It looks delicious," Mother said.

I took a bite, and chewed, and nodded. "Look, Ma," I said. "Would you mind reading some of those poems tonight—like before?"

"All right, Tony. If you want."

"Will you read the one about 'He travels the—the farthest who travels alone?'"

"All right—if you want."

MY MOST

WHAT is the funniest thing that ever happened to you? Tell us about it.

Anecdotes offered for publication in this department should not be longer than five hundred words and may be much shorter. For all anecdotes published by us we will pay from five to twenty-five dollars, according to our appraisal of their

In the Paddy-Wagon

THIS happened away back in 1911 when I was going to the University. I ran around with a dandy bunch of fellows, but some of them were given to imbibing and arriving home of a Saturday night a little loud and a little boisterous in the old-fashioned college way. I didn't drink—and was very welcome. There was always someone to take everybody home and get them on the right cars and off at the right street. We didn't have automobiles then.

Well—in college was a girl I wanted to date, but she was very firm in her opinion that I was a sort of low-life and bum; she felt I certainly must be that because she had heard of the wild homecomings of the gang and I was with them. It took all my skill to partly convince her maybe I wasn't so bad. Finally I made the grade for a date: Two weeks hence on a Saturday night.

The next Saturday night we all went down to one of the spots that the boys always took in. We crowded in the back room, where there was an old decrepit piano, horribly out of tune and almost ready to fall apart. We ribbed the proprietor about it, and he told us he had a new one coming the following Monday. What to do with the old one was his worry. The upshot of the deal was that we all chipped in and bought the piano for five dollars, and agreed to take it out.

As the evening drew to a convivial close, we started to tear the piano apart. It was a fine riot. Some snoopy souls peered in and saw the destruction taking place, and without further ado called the police, who arrived in an old-fashioned paddy-wagon. They burst in the front all primed for action, but the proprietor assured them it was our piano, and we could do as we pleased with it. The police took in the show, and one big fellow asked permission to jump up and down on the keyboard. He claimed he hated pianos, and all his life he'd just wanted

AMUSING EXPERIENCE

quality both in presentation and in story. Please address them to the My Most Amusing Experience Editor, Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. We cannot acknowledge or return unpublished contributions, but all will be carefully considered. All published material becomes the property of McCall Corporation.

to leap up and down on a keyboard. Agreed—with the proviso that they haul us all up town to the main carline in the wagon.

Each fellow had some part of the wreckage, and to me fell the better part of the keyboard. The wagon was full, so I stood on the steps. As we went careening uptown, the driver doing his stuff, I had a hard time to hang on. At Fourteenth Street the driver made a sharp turn, the wheels caught in the car tracks, the resultant lurch tossed me off the steps. I lit on my back, keyboard clutched to my stomach, and thus I slid on the foggy wet street into the gutter. Stopped at the curb with a thud, I looked up to see looking down at me in utter horror—the girl for the date next Saturday night.

Nothing would ever convince her that I was simply and utterly no earthly good. Hadn't she seen me, with her own eyes—boldly escape from a patrol wagon loaded with my convivial friends on the way to the bastille, and slide into the gutter clutching the keyboard of a piano? Who, who in heaven's name other than a drunken bum would do such a thing? Well—me. I paid fifty cents for my share of that piano.

R. E. Feuster.

Moscow Hotel

I was not amusing at the time; but viewed in retrospect, it has given me many a laugh.

On a trip through Russia, in 1936. I depended on Intourist, the government tourist agency, to look after all travel details. When I wished to move on, I simply notified their agent. I would be told what time my train left, a taxi would be waiting at the hotel door, and I would find my baggage in the sleeping compartment that had been reserved for me.

An hour before my train was due to leave Moscow, I went to my hotel room to pack. I decided I could do with a bath, so I peeled down to the buff, slipped on a bathrobe and went down

the hall to the bath. The water was warm, a luxury in Russia, and I stayed in the tub until there was just time to dress and catch my train.

Back in my room. I found a maid sweeping but no trace of baggage or clothing. The maid spoke no English, and I spoke no Russian. I tried the sign language, but my signs were grievously misunderstood. The gal was prepared to sell her honor dearly. She swung her broom and charged. I took it on the lam.

Clad only in bathrobe and slippers. I went down to the lobby, but found a bevy of Frenchwomen clustered in front of the Intourist counter.

"Where are my clothes?" I demanded, crowding in ahead of them.

With strange people from all over the world, dressed in their native costumes, passing her desk daily, the young woman in charge of Intourist noticed nothing wrong with my attire.

"What is your room number?" she asked.

"Three twenty-one," I answered.

"Impossible," she said after running her finger down a list. "Three twenty-one has now departed for Leningrad."

Meanwhile the Frenchwomen had been cackling indignantly. I did not need to know French to know they were asking: Who did I think I was, crowding in ahead of them? One of them grabbed my robe and gave a jerk that nearly stripped me. Not until then did the Intourist clerk get an inkling of what it was all about.

She asked my name and checked it against her list, then came hurrying out of her cubicle. She grabbed my arm and rushed me outside to the street. She pushed me into a big car and let loose a volley of Russian as the driver meshed gears. The driver fairly pulled me from the car when we arrived at the railway station. He hustled me through a door and pointed to a train that was just starting to turn its wheels. I picked up the skirts of my robe and raced alongside the train, looking for an open vestibule.

A soldier, standing on the steps of the third car to wave at his girl friend, gave me my chance. I jumped and made it. Pausing in the corridor of the car to catch my breath, I happened to glance through the open door of a compartment. There were my bags, with my suit neatly folded across the top.

The hotel porter had been ordered to take all the baggage in Room 321 to the train. He had done that little thing.

Robert C. Vance.

A Suspicious Nature

ONE evening after work I stopped in a tavern near the Allis Chalmers Mfg. Co. I am familiar with most of the patrons of this place, but on this occasion I soon found myself in conversation with a tall, soft-spoken, and neatly dressed man who was a stranger to me.

He told me quite affably that his name was Schaffer and that he too was employed at the large defense plant where I worked. His manner was natural enough, but his method of questioning me aroused my suspicion almost immediately. Every subject on which he touched would eventually end in some query about my work: Were my fellow-workers satisfied? What was my department making now? Were we speeding up production or tapering off?

After a while I began to lead him on by giving out bits of quite false information and by assuming the attitude that I knew some really important things which an attractive offer might tempt me to tell. I also tried a few questions of my own in the hope of tripping him up: How long had he worked here? What was his department making now? And so on.

His manner changed almost at once to one of watchful uneasiness, and in a few minutes he asked to be excused on some pretense of making a call.

This was just about too much for my suspicious nature, and so, after he had been gone a few minutes, I asked the barkeeper if I might use his private phone to ring up the police.

"Try to keep him there until our officer comes," said the desk sergeant, after hearing my story. "He must be the real thing because some other guy from that place just reported him a couple of minutes ago."

"Did he leave his name?" I asked.

"William Schaffer," was the reply.

This would have made a much better story if I had waited for the officer to arrive. But not thinking of any literary possibilities at the time, I simply slipped through the crowd as quickly as possible and made an ignominious exit from the side door.

Howard Sturtevant.

AGAINST THE STRANGE BACKGROUND
OF LONDON DURING ITS LAST
BOMBINGS, THIS VIVID DRAMA
COMES TO ITS CLIMAX.

by GORDON
KEYNE

*Illustrated by
Manning de V. Lee*



You'll Get Nowhere by

THE empty room was heavy with the agony of decision. Kendrick felt stifled by it. He was going under, and knew it. He was, at last, broken.

The two men were alone in the club—one of the few London clubs remaining open. The building next door had been bomb-wrecked: the rooms here were dismantled—the windows were gone, boarded up and shuttered; but the old club attendant still potted about, keeping the place alive for the few occasional members who still dropped in.

Steward, the grizzled solicitor who had guided the Kendrick fortunes these many years, scowled at the younger man.

"The Runciman people are filing another suit," he said. "It's their last gasp. All they want is to devil you in to a settlement. Alan."

Kendrick groaned. "I can't go through with more of it," he said wearily. "Settle it and have done."

"What?" Steward almost exploded. "After fighting a grand fight for six years? Why, lad, you can't give up now! You can't!"

"I must. I'll go mad if there's more of this struggle! It's taken my money, my will-power, my energy, everything I have, to prove to the world that my father was not a scoundrel! Now I'm done. Just settle the damned thing."

"And admit that your father was a rascal?"

That barb sank deep, but the prod failed. Kendrick's nerves were shattered.

"Nothing matters any more," he said. "Nothing human counts. We're too small, against this background of fire and slaughter and war. Nobody will know or care a hang about my puny affairs. Let it all go, and settle."

Kendrick was in the Civil Service now—just turned twenty-eight, unmarried, retired from active duty because of injuries in the North African campaign; and, he told himself, he was helpless to fight on.

During six bitter years, he had struggled to clear his father's name, and had succeeded, but the fight had worn him down. It had embittered his life.



Quitting

The renewal of air-raids and now these accursed rocket-bombs had been a last straw. Bomb-harried nights and days sap the vitality and create a heavy weariness of heart. He could fight no more.

"Let me tell you something," Steward leaned forward. "All of life is struggle, lad. You can't get away from it. You may be heartbroken, weary, wrecked—but you have to keep fighting, you have to carry on! You may be a millionaire, but you have to keep on fighting. That's life. You can't get away from it, I tell you! You may stand alone against the world, but you must struggle. Even if you give up and go under, you struggle into death. There's the law of life. Strug-

gle against others or against yourself—"

"I'm sunk," broke in Kendrick, with a hopeless gesture. "Settle the blasted thing and end it."

Steward rose, with a sigh. "I'm sorry. I've fought, too, for your father's sake. He was my friend. If that's your last word, I'll say no more. But mind you there's no getting away from it! You'll get nowhere by quitting—neither you, nor anybody else. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

He stalked out angrily, without a farewell.

KENDRICK got his belongings and left the club. The afternoon was late; storm-clouds hung dark in the sky; and what with a thin mist and the blackout, the streets were all but Egyptian. Kendrick headed for a dinner spot he knew, intending to dine and get away home before any show started. If the Jerries came, or more of their infernal robot-planes, they would not appear until eight o'clock or so.

He did not regret his decision. He simply could not go through with any more of it. A brother killed in Greece, his uncle dead in the Coventry raid. . . . He was all alone now, and everything inside him had crumpled. He was done.

Reaching the restaurant, he found relaxation over the dinner table. A drink brightened him, and he ordered his meal with anticipation. The place was cheerful and well filled; music stole softly across the room; laughter rang upon the air; for the moment, the madness of men was forgotten.

"Yes, it was wise to settle," he reflected, lighting a cigarette. He was not far from the entrance: with his back to it and the room before him, he eyed the other tables casually. He felt only a vast relief that he had so chosen.

Yet Steward's words burned a little. "Admit that my father was a rascal? No. It's merely admitting that I'm all washed up. Nothing matters any more, these days. Can't get away from it, eh? But I can. I have!"

With his trim, soldierly build, his pleasantly strong features, his whimsical way of looking at the world, Kendrick was a man to get second glances from most women, or had been. Now he looked years older than his age; whimsy was turning into a bitter cynicism, his careful orderly habits were breaking up. Give up, give up! Why the devil not? Better give up than end as a piece of broken human wreckage!

"You can't get away from it!" He smiled at the memory of the words. Struggle? No more for him. Settle the case, and end it without a fight. . . .

He glanced up, startled, as the head waiter pulled out the chair opposite

him, holding it for a young woman who was at his very elbow. She touched his cheek with her hand, lightly, caressingly, as she passed around him.

"Don't get up, George. Sorry I was late," she said, taking the chair opposite. "You know how it is, these days; one can't depend on the trains—"

Kendrick rose in hasty confusion, then caught her gesture, her low word.

"Pretend—please pretend! Quickly!"

He bowed, repeated himself, and stared at her quite frankly. He could not well help it. She was gowned in beige wool trimmed with fur, with a cape to match. Beneath the beige cap showed a bright lovely face surrounded by a glitter of hair like spun gold and blue eyes wide with alarm and appeal. Kendrick smiled, caught the waiter's eye, and beckoned.

"High time you showed up," said he. "I had lost hope. —Henri, madame will order; hold my service until hers is ready. And add a bottle of Chamberlain if there's any left."

She flashed him one glance of evident thanks and relief, devoted herself to the menu, and ordered quite casually. Then she put it aside, and when the waiter had gone, spoke with smiling unconcern.

"Well, what have you been doing all day?" Without change of expression, she laid her handbag on the table and produced cigarettes, and went on under her breath: "Careful! They're watching you . . . Not sure . . . I've been very foolish; do forgive me."

Kendrick held a light for her. "Oh, the usual thing; a dull day," he said, and added: "Anything wrong? There's a policeman at the corner if you want me to—"

"No, no!" she replied with a shake of her head. She exhaled, and he saw her eyes flash past him, toward the entrance. "I think it's going off all right . . . Wait, now."

HE waited, critically; her face was honest, with delicate beauty. She was his own kind; that gown and cape, so roughly warm yet so superbly fitted, was eloquent; so were the little touches—her hair, her fingers slimly perfect, her shell-pink ears, her voice. After a moment she relaxed, sat back in her chair, and her eyes returned to him almost in panic.

"It's all right; they've gone," she said. "Thank heaven!"

Kendrick smiled. "I should be the one to render thanks. It will be a great pleasure to be rid of loneliness for once. My name, however, is not George; it is Alan Kendrick."

Color stole into her face. "You are kind," she said in a low voice. "I am Cynthia Weyman; not that names matter. They followed me, you see—"

... women. They knew that—that I dared not call a policeman. . . . There is a great deal of money in my handbag—"

Her voice trailed away. Suddenly she looked up at him, directly.

"There isn't any George, you know. I—I invented that."

Her words, her naïve look, caused him to break into laughter.

"Superb! Cynthia, I congratulate you; more, I believe you." He stretched his arm across the table, hand out to hers. "Shake on it, young lady! I think we shall be friends."

HE was astonished by his own spontaneous words and gesture. She shook hands confusedly; yet he knew that she was pleased. And in consequence Kendrick himself felt pleased and gratified. His cynical, careful self abruptly yielded to reality. A warm glow stole through him; he showed his own happiness and was instantly another and very likable person. As the hardness died out of his features, he became human, frank, friendly—and he was aware that she was staring hard at him, as though seeing him for the first time.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You," she said with the simplicity of a child. "You're different, somehow; you don't look the way you did."

"Thank heaven! Come, tell me all about it. Where are you from?"

She waited. The waiter was hovering; and while he served them, she kept silence. When they were alone again, replied hesitantly:

"Norfolk. I came up to London today. It's very hard to tell you, because you're a stranger—but I know you'll understand. There were some securities, American securities; they were all we had, after Father was killed in the Norfolk raids. He had refused to register them with Government; it was wrong, of course, but we couldn't help that. The securities were in two small privately owned companies, and could not be traced to us."

She was frightened by her own confession, and no wonder.

Kendrick was well aware that the Government had long ago taken over all foreign securities, privately owned; he could conceive how some stubborn Norfolk man might have refused to turn over his stocks, although the Government paid a fair market price. And with the obstinate fellow dead in a raid, the rest of the family would be left in a hole.

"Lord! What absolute folly!" he said slowly.

She nodded. "I know. We could not help it."

"But why didn't you try to patch up matters with the Government after—after he died?"

Her eyes struck up at him like blue steel, startled and indignant.

"Don't you see? It was impossible! It would have meant confessing that he had done wrong—it would have been unpatriotic in him, and all that. A black mark against him. That had to be avoided, at all costs!"

The words jerked at Kendrick. . . . "Had to be avoided at all costs!" Yes, he had thought the same thing, once. He had fought for years for that very principle; and now he had given up the fight. He shook his head.

"I don't know, Cynthia; none of us matter, any more. Nothing matters."

"That's not true!" she shot out. "You don't really think so. I'll never think so! To us, to me, Father's name shall be kept clear! Well, we heard that there were people in London who made a business of purchasing such securities. I've sold them, for cash, but at a loss. Government might have seized them outright if we'd made a confession. . . . Oh, it was all so miserably mishandled by poor Father! However, it's all right now. Well, there were two men in the office. I don't know who they were—"

"But they knew you had the money, eh? And followed you? I see."

She nodded again. "I was terribly frightened. I knew of this place because we used to come here, so I directed the cab. And they were behind me in another cab. . . . Well, you know everything now."

Kendrick smiled. "And it's all over. You're quite safe; they'll not bother you again. It was a bit of quick thinking on your part; good work! And now, how can I help you? What are your plans? What do you want to do?"

She hesitated. She opened her lips to reply—then a startled shiver went through her. They both heard it—that wailing shriek passed on and on across the sky to tell of raiders. The waiter came to them with reassurance.

"Nothing to worry about, sir," he said to Kendrick. "Best go on with your dinner, and if the spotters signal trouble, the shelter's ready."

Kendrick nodded, and Cynthia gave him a shaky smile.

"Well," she said, "I meant to catch the night train down, but now I suppose that's out of the question."

"Rather!" he assented. "You'll not get out of London before tomorrow, with the raids on. Why not go to the Savoy? They'll take care of your money; they have a luxurious shelter, and it's fairly close by here."

She brightened. "Very well; I was too agitated to think of a hotel, but it's a good idea."

The music was playing now; at Kendrick's invitation she rose, and they danced, the handbag hanging on her arm. It was a stout cloth bag, not

handsome; Kendrick wondered how much money could be in it. Twenty-pound notes would require little space, of course. . . .

She danced well, and he was intoxicated by her closeness; more correctly, he found himself enchanted by her. As for her errand, her confession, that was somewhat in the same class with smuggling; the Government might consider it a crime, but few others would. He laughed at the whole thing with her, asked her a question or two, and found that the pair who followed her had been in the office where she had transacted her business—shady business in the eyes of the law, naturally. Had they been able to rob her, she would have had no recourse. . . .

All ended now, he said cheerfully, and conducted her back to the table. The dinner came; the wine was served. They discovered mutual acquaintances; her blue eyes danced. Sharing a mutual secret, they became old friends almost at once. . . .

Suddenly the alarm rang; the raiders were overhead. There was little haste and no confusion. The room emptied itself; Cynthia on his arm, Kendrick walked downstairs with the throng, into a well-lighted portion of the cellars where chairs were placed. The musicians came too. The music struck up again; there was more dancing. Everything was matter-of-fact—

UNTIL, suddenly, the world shook and trembled. Dust burst from one of the cellar walls and spread through the air. The wall itself bulged, and then, apparently quite gradually, went to pieces and disintegrated into a rattling pour of stones across the floor. A bomb had landed very close. The music stopped; Kendrick saw one of the musicians lying on the floor, blood staining his face.

A woman screamed—not Cynthia. Their dance halted; she was clinging to Kendrick's arms. And abruptly, as though a hand had turned the switch, the lights went off; the place was plunged into pitch blackness.

He felt her hands grip at him hard. The earth was still rocking. He freed one arm and slipped it about her shoulders. His voice lifted, ringing out hard but composed.

"Quiet, everyone! Two of you musicians lift the chap who's down. Someone strike a match. There'll be another bomb; always two in company. After it comes, make for the stairs and keep your heads."

It came, while he spoke; it was close enough for the grinding concussion to be felt distinctly, but not close enough to cause more damage. Coughs sounded; the dust was choking to the lungs. Voices rose in steady reassurance; there was no panic. Ken-



Another clip from the slungshot sent Kendrick back against the wall.

drick felt Cynthia clinging to him and coughing. He swung her toward the stairs; a match blazed, directing them. Water splashed, spreading across the floor; the mains were broken.

Up above, they found candles being lighted; otherwise, everything was as they had left it. At their table, Kendrick seated Cynthia and lifted his wineglass to her. She emptied her own, hurriedly. The waiter came to them.

"The shelter next door, sir, has been put at our disposal."

He had almost to shout. The air was a pandemonium of horror, what with distant roaring concussions and the deafening hammer of the air barrage, with the bells of fire engines clanging down the street outside. Kendrick glanced at the girl's pale face.

"Can't run from it, you know; the streets will be full of falling fragments. Gulp more wine, eat what you

can, and keep a cool head. —All right, Henri. We'll go next door, in a moment or two."

He himself was badly shaken, but gave no sign of it. A few others were proceeding with their meal; most were streaming out of the place.

WHEN Kendrick had forced his nerves into comparative quiet, he met the eyes of Cynthia and they rose. He paid, for the check was not overlooked, and they joined the crowd at the entrance, where air-raid wardens had taken charge. She thrust the handbag against him.

"Fake this, please; it'll be safer with you if anything happens."

He tucked it under his arm, and paused to light a cigarette.

"I'll take you around to the Savoy later, as soon as there's a lull," he observed cheerfully. "Until then, we'll have to see it through. Frightened?"

"Not so much, now; just dazed," she replied. He patted her hand and they stepped out into the street.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "A bit of a fire on, eh? The Jerries are doing themselves well!"

The near-by heavens were lurid with flame-glow; shells were bursting continuously, and the wardens hurried the line of refugees along the short stretch of street to the next building. Just before reaching the inviting doorway, Kendrick paused.

"You keep going, Cynthia. I'll inquire about the chances of reaching the Savoy; I'll be along directly."

She followed the others into the doorway, and disappeared.

Kendrick turned toward a policeman who stood at one side. Despite his shock, he was a new man and felt it; exhilaration sang through his blood. He could guess with what trepidation Cynthia had confided the

secret of her errand—yet not because forced, but because she trusted him. Yes, she liked him; he could feel it! And sensing this, he tasted life anew.

The darkness was ruddily banished by the sky-glare. The policeman gave him a sharp glance and advised him to take cover.

Kendrick nodded.

"Right. What chance of reaching the Savoy?"

"You'll have to walk, sir. The services are off, and no tube trains are running in this section. It would be best to wait for the All Clear."

"Obviously," Kendrick said dryly.

He watched the sky and the shellbursts there; he listened to the far scream of siren bombs. Down the street broke out a score of tiny flickering flames, and there was a rush of figures to extinguish them before the thermite burst into its intense glare. Kendrick turned in at the open doorway where Cynthia had gone.

HE passed along a dimly lit corridor, down wide stairs, then down another flight, with the roaring, racking din of murder fading away behind, mercifully, as the doors were closed between. The relief of this cessation was unspeakable. Before he knew it, Kendrick was at the bottom of the flight; unexpectedly he came upon an enormous space jam-packed with people and thundering with reverberant voices, but flickering with only occasional lights. The services off, yes; no electricity. Candles, flashlights, matches—nothing else.

It was no ordinary shelter, but a huge place; and for a moment he halted in sheer dismay. He had anticipated nothing like this. There must be hundreds of people about, sprawled on the floor, crowded in on all sides, huddling together for companionship and warmth; yet there was room for hundreds more. As he stood, bewildered, he heard two men talking near by. This was a huge, ancient wine-cellar, one was saying, belonging to some long defunct hotel or club.

Kendrick looked about. He could see nothing of Cynthia, and began to search the obscurity in a dismay that grew more acute as the moments passed. Why the devil had she not waited by the entrance? This was an impossible thing, without lights . . .

His search was vain; his dismay deepened into panic. Some enthusiast got up a wave of singing. It was heightened a thousandfold by the vaulted roof, and everyone was bellying away at top voice. Kendrick went from one massive pillar to another, picked his way amid the mass of humanity by light-flashes, and cursed the foul air. Then he wandered aimlessly, with desperate alarm constricting his heart. . . . Hopeless!

Desperate, he made his way back to the entrance and ascended the stairs. He gained the ground-floor corridor again, hoping against hope that she might have paused to wait there, that he might have passed her unseen in the obscurity. He came out to the street and turned back. He was oblivious of the shuddering earth and air, of the blazing gunfire overhead, of the dull concussions that told of bombs.

He descended anew to the cellars, his whole energy centered upon finding that slim figure in beige. He sought her in every shadow; he fancied her in every group; and she was not. The search was useless, he realized.

With sinking heart, he drew aside into an empty dark corner of the cellars. Gripping his nails in his palms, staring out across the sea of darkness and flickering light-points and prostrate humanity, he tried desperately to reflect, to consider, to decide on something; and meantime the thunderous singing was maddening.

He had lost a precious thing, he told himself with a groan: the most precious thing. He had known her an hour, and would never again find life the same without her. He cursed savagely at his own folly in parting with her, even for five minutes. . . .

He awakened abruptly to the feel of the handbag under his arm; the realization for an instant staggered him. He had carried it mechanically, utterly forgetful that he had it. He had left her, had walked off with the handbag; and unless he found her quickly, she would think that he had decamped with her money.

"No, no, that's nonsense," he muttered. "She'd never think such a thing. She'd know better. Pull yourself together, you fool, before you go to pieces!"

He struck a match and held it aloft; yes, the bag was quite all right. Before the match died, he lit a cigarette at it. . . . That confounded singing! It was deafening, even in this retired corner. A number of lanterns had been brought and now stood about or hung from hooks in the massive pillars, somewhat dispelling the worst of the blackness.

So close that he started, a flashlight blinked at him with blinding ray, then was cut off. Two indistinct figures moved in on him; through a momentary lull in the singing, a man's voice reached at him.

"All right, Alf; it's him. You take it. I'll quiet him."

Again the light leaped out blindingly; the figure on his left darted at him, seized the handbag and wrenched it free. The light died.

Kendrick, caught off guard, staggered under a blow from the second man, lost his footing, and went down.

As he fell, however, he reached out and caught the ankle of the one who had the handbag, toppled him neatly, and both came to the stones together. In that sharp instant, Kendrick remembered the match he had struck, revealing his own face and the handbag—and remembered the two men in the restaurant. Though he had not seen them, he knew these two must be the same ones.

Then he had no chance to think at all. His one object was to get back the handbag. It was too big, too fatly stuffed, for concealment. He mauled his man savagely, felt the cloth of the bag under his hand, gripped it and got it clear. The man under his hands was screaming something inarticulate, for Kendrick was grinding his face against the stones where the fallen cigarette glowed.

Again the pencil of light flickered briefly. Kendrick, half erect, clutching the handbag, fell back against the corner wall; the man holding the light was striking out with a persuader or slungshot. This second crack was a bad one over the eye. The fallen man was on his feet; both of them were pitching forward—

Kendrick chucked the handbag under his arm, behind him, into the corner; they could not reach it unless they got rid of him. His hands free, he met their rush solidly. For an instant he knew himself master, as his fists hammered them; and all the while rose the reëchoing roar of the singing voices, drowning every other sound.

IT was blind work. One of the two went staggering; then the slungshot reached home again. Kendrick fell back against the wall, felt the handbag under his feet, recovered and grappled with his assailant. Another star-dazzling crack over the head. He strove frantically to grip the arm holding that weapon, and could not; but he could fight, and did. He was not master any longer, for those blows had hurt cruelly; still, he rocked one of the two off his feet with a hard, clean smash before another clip from the slungshot sent him dizzily back against the wall, arms outflung.

Then they came at him, both of them at once. He fought on, though his knees were buckling, though the force was gone out of him, though he could scarcely see for the blinding pain of those cracks across the skull. He fought on; and came to one knee, and saw the man with the slungshot step back for a finishing blow.

Suddenly as they had gone off, the lights came on full, through the whole expanse of the vast cellars, lighting every nook and corner. In upon the singing burst a wild yell of delight that swept the crowded masses in reverberant greeting. The force of it

helped pull Kendrick to his feet as the two, who had momentarily paused, returned to the attack. He tried to meet the savage assault, heard shouts of alarm go up from the closer groups, saw men coming on the run, saw the two turn and dash away and disappear from sight.

Then, amid chorused exclamations of indignation and eager helpfulness, he was being supported while questions were fired at him; he gestured toward the handbag at his feet, and wiped blood from his eyes. It was streaming from a cut in his forehead.

"They were after this—this bag," he said. "It belongs to a friend . . . I got separated from her in the darkness . . . Thanks, I'm all right now."

Not all right by a good deal, but his head was clearing.

"Take 'im in to the 'orspital, mates," cried a coster in shell-spangled Sunday jacket. Kendrick protested.

"I don't need any hospital, thanks."

"It's right here, off the rear stairs," said another man, picking up Kendrick's fallen hat and coat. "Best have the doctor look at that cut. Here, I'll fetch along the handbag."

Kendrick yielded; when he tried to walk, everything went blurry. For the moment a fiercely exultant jubilation filled him; a good fight, a winning fight! He had fought it through!

And for what? The warm glow died out, and a groan came to his lips. She was none the less lost. Even with the lights to help, she was lost; he could not find her now. He got through the crowd in growing alarm and panic, protesting all offers and advice to call the police; with a couple of men helping him, he came to an open doorway behind the stairs, was handed over to a doctor and two nurses, and found himself in a handsomely equipped little hospital unit of several rooms. He saw the handbag deposited safely, and sank back into a long chair while the doctor went to work on his face and head.

A shot of brandy pulled him around, but it could not conquer his morose gloom. He said nothing while

his hurts were dressed. A nurse picked up his hands to show the barked knuckles, and the doctor grunted.

"By George, you must have put up a fight! All right, my lad; you'll be as good as new in another ten minutes. They tell me those rascals got away . . . Too bad. Can't have this sort of goings-on in the shelters. Though I must say it's given us a bit to do: we've had a quiet evening of it. No cases except a woman who fainted. See here, why not lie down for a bit? We've plenty of cots, you know."

"Thanks, no." Kendrick came to his feet, felt his head and the bandaged cut over his eye. He turned, glancing at his things and at the handbag; then, looking beyond them, he saw something else. Something hanging on the wall—something that drew a gasp and a startled word from him. A beige cape, fur-trimmed!

"WHAT'S that? Whose is that?" he demanded. "It can't be—but it is! It's hers!"

"Hello, you know her?" said the doctor. "Belongs to the woman who passed out. Shock, I imagine; she's lying down in the next room. Come along in, if you like."

Kendrick, in a wild tumult of emotions, was already stumbling past into the adjoining room. The only occupied cot was directly before him; she was there, she was looking at him, a blanket drawn over her.

"Thank God, thank God!" he broke out huskily. "I thought I'd lost you, Cynthia. Nothing else mattered."

Her fingers touched him, caressed him gently; a cry escaped her.



"Thank God," he broke out. "I thought I'd lost you, Cynthia."

"But you're hurt! What is it? What's happened, Doctor?"

"A bit of a scrimmage," said the smiling medico. "No great damage. By the way, the All Clear has just sounded. The Jerries might be along again later, so in case you want to get anywhere, it might be a good chance."

Kendrick had sunk to his knees beside her. He looked into her eyes.

"I was a terrible fool to leave you, even for a minute!" he said. "I'll not do it again, if I can help it! What do you say? Shall we get along now?"

Her hand touched his cheek, lingered there. She smiled a little.

"Life's so uncertain, these days—we'd be silly to say good-by so soon! There are so many things I want to ask you, Alan Kendrick, and they matter so little, really."

He touched his lips to her fingers again and rose. He turned to the doctor and there was a new, leaping blaze in his eyes.

"Have you a telephone here?"

"Yes; I'll see if the service is on. Afraid you'll not get a taxi, though."

"I don't want a taxi."

A moment later Kendrick was ringing Steward's apartment, and heard the gruff voice of the old solicitor.

"Steward? This is Alan Kendrick," he said crisply.

"Ha! Sounds like the old Kendrick," came the response.

He laughed. "You may well say so. About that lawsuit, Steward—I've changed my mind. Go in and fight. Don't settle. Fight like hell, and fight 'em to a finish!"

"The Lord be thanked!" said Steward devoutly. "What's happened, lad? Why, you sound like a new man! What's changed your mind?"

"Nothing's changed my mind. I've merely decided that you were right about the primal law of struggle; you can't get away from it. See you to-morrow."

Kendrick hung up. He turned, and with a smile held out his hand to Cynthia.

"Come along, young lady! Let's go see the world. It's waiting for us!"

Lost Interview

A Story in Brief

by CAPTAIN RICHARD G. HUBLER

I SAW Father Redfield twice. Or three times, in a way. The first time was on Guadalcanal. His camp, the camp of the Marine Raiders, was on the farther side of Guadalcanal near a big bomber field. The road—two ruts and a thousand jeeps—went over a couple pontoon bridges, past some Raiders doing their wash, into a flat plain of black earth and then past a little white monument erected in the memory of some French sailor who had been drowned in a typhoon.

Father Redfield had his tent fifty yards away from the monument. I had a cot, several battered books in a packing-case, a rubber boat in a state of repair, an American flag, and an altar built of bamboo. The books were for the Raiders in the moments when they relaxed—which wasn't often enough to be noticeable—and the rubber boat was a job Father Redfield had taken on. The American flag was to put over the dead. The altar spoke for itself.

One more thing: There was a ragged, dirty, purple stole. Father Redfield always wore it in battle. It was his own insignia and he didn't care if it made him conspicuous.

As Public Relations officer for Headquarters, it was my job to pick up stories and relay them to the correspondents. I thought Father Redfield might make a good story.

He was taller than average with gray-black hair going back from the temples. His ears stuck out. He was well filled out but not plump. His face had a deep tan; it was wrinkled a little on the forehead. He was dressed in a rumpled, green-and-brown spotted jungle suit.

His eyes were the best part of him. They were blue and warm and alive and kind.

I sat on the rubber boat while he talked. I took some notes but I listened and wondered most of the time. I knew that Father Redfield and the Raiders would be going into action soon. The rumors of a big push to the north were everywhere and it was no secret that the Raiders would be the spearhead.

"A great lot of men," Father Redfield was saying, "a grand lot. Some of them steal, but not many. They curse a lot but they don't mean it. They have bad thoughts, they tell me, but so do I and so does everyone.

They're boys and just like any boys anywhere—tougher perhaps, but still boys. I love 'em all. Put that down."

I put it down. "Put something else, too," said Father Redfield. "Put it down that they love God. That's important. I don't think a lot of them love their fellowmen, but that takes time. Loving God is easy and natural and they do that. When they grow up they will learn to love other people." There was a shadow in the blue eyes. "And those who don't get a chance to grow up," he said slowly, "will go in the love of God; that will be enough."

We talked about a lot of things afterward. I don't remember any more than that. There wasn't any news in it, not even a scrub feature story. So I didn't turn it over to the correspondents or write it myself.

The Raiders shoved off ten days later. They were going to hit Viru against the Japanese. It was to be one of the surprise landings on the New Georgia Islands.

They spent two weeks in the jungle. Then they came out, in their green tin cans, and back to their old camping ground on Guadalcanal. I went over to see Father Redfield again.

He was a good deal thinner. His face had fallen in and seemed more rugged than I remembered. His hair seemed a little less dark, but it might have been my imagination. The only thing familiar about him were his eyes. They had not changed except perhaps for a steadier look and a depth I had not before noticed.

His tent was almost the same as before. He had a new American flag and the rubber boat and the books weren't there. His jungle suit wasn't his and it was dirty.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to give you much of a story," he told me. He stopped abruptly. His voice clogged and his eyes suddenly shone with tears. "They're such boys. And so many dead. I can't talk very well about it all. It was magnificent, but I can't tell it. So many to be cared for. So many to be buried."

I could see he was not the one to talk to. I apologized and went away. He waved after me and his figure was in a kind of halation from the setting sun. I went over to the tent of the brusque, mustached colonel who commanded the Raiders.

He told me. Father Redfield had been everywhere. Regardless of the

Japanese bullets, he had administered the last rites with his torn stole around his neck. He had comforted Catholics, Protestants, and Jews alike. He became so reckless that he had to be assigned a corporal to guard him. The Colonel told me what had happened in one instance.

Father Redfield had been kneeling over a dying Marine Raider when his corporal spoke. "Pardon me, Father," he said hurriedly, "but I've got to kill this son of a bitch!" He fired and a Japanese sniper that had been drawing a bead on Father Redfield crashed out of a palm down to the ground.

"He's worth fifty men," said the Colonel gruffly. "Not in firepower, you understand, or in the terms of strategy. But in the spiritual Tables of Organization. Spirit-power, you might say."

It was his phrase and I tried to steal it for my story. But it wouldn't come out on paper. So I didn't write my second story.

Files of Raiders were going past with boxes and bundles. "Where are they going?" I asked. The Colonel pointed. They were taking them aboard a half-dozen steel landing barges. Out in the bay, in the gathering darkness, I could see the shapes of two destroyers.

"Going again?" I asked. The Colonel nodded. "Tonight," he said.

I DIDN'T see the Raiders for another fortnight. When I heard they had come in, I took a jeep through the dust to their camp for the third time. I went to the Colonel's tent first. He was slumped at his field desk, running his fingers lovingly over an open box of cigars. He looked up as I came in. "Couldn't smoke during the whole operation," he told me shamefacedly. "The first one made me kind of sick but I'm all right now."

I asked about Father Redfield, and the Colonel shook his head. "Dead?" I asked.

"Dead," said the Colonel. "They got him."

I tried to pull the words out of my throat in the right order. "Could you tell me about it?" I said carefully.

The Colonel sighed. "Not much to tell," he said. "We were in our usual tight spot. We hadn't expected as many Japanese as there were. So we were holding on, with bullets knocking off leaves all around us. Father Redfield was down the line. . . .

"I didn't see it. But they told me. Somebody shouted, 'I'm hit. Father.' He went right away, of course, the damned fool—right over to where he could help."

The Colonel lit a cigar.

"Yes?" I ventured.

"It was a Japanese," said the Colonel. "Grenade."



WOLF BLOOD

The story of a problem dog, and a boy who fought hard for him

by James Hopper

THEY were still deep in the hills, where their Sunday drive had taken them when they stopped at that lonely ranch to refill the radiator. Mike's father sprang out to man the pump, while Mike remained on the front seat by his mother. A pack of dogs was about—yellow dogs, with long narrow eyes, and they barked with falsetto voices. From his rawhide chair on the porch, the rancher called across to Mike:

"Want to see something?"

Mike was quite willing to see something, and the rancher took him to a shed behind the barn. Another of the strange yellow dogs was there, but its eyes were soft. It lay stretched out on its side in the dim light, and small puppies like bundles of yellow down

were pressed tight against it in a row. Mike stooped swiftly and scooped up one of them.

"Eh, wait a minute!" the rancher warned. "You've got the runt!"

But Mike was already running for the car. As he ran, the flick of a tiny warm tongue across his nose completed his rapture.

"Can I have it? Can I have it?" he cried, stamping with eagerness.

"No," said his father, and "No," said his mother: but all the same, when the car started again a few minutes later, Mike held the pup on his lap. By evening he had him installed in a box on the kitchen porch—all his own, and with a name. The name was "Rattles," chosen by Mike himself, who admired the choice. "Isn't it a beautiful name, Mother?"

There followed a tense period as Rattles, taken from his mother a little too soon, was being anxiously weaned by means of a sponge and prodigal pails of milk. The dog grew fast, big-boned and hard-muscled; he had the rough yellow coat of his relatives back at the ranch, and their eyes too—long and narrow. But he was not grown yet when trouble began.

Mike's father was crossing the kitchen porch at dusk, on his way to the detached studio. He stooped, in passing, to give the pup a friendly tap—and immediately he felt sharp small fangs sink into the back of his hand.

Mike's father slapped the pup, then once more placed a hand on his back. Like a flash, Rattles bit again. Mike's father slapped again, again placed his hand on the pup, and



again Rattles snapped back. Mike came running out. It was a sinister scene for the small boy—in the darkness, the man slapping, the dog yelping. Mike began to cry. "Oh," he cried, "he's going to kill my dog!"

Long afterward, Mike's father would tell the story. "Know what?" he would say at the end. "He was crying because I was hitting his dog—not because his dog was biting me!"

Mike didn't like the story very much. But that was a minor matter. By that time he had entered fully into his secret worry.

He and Rattles were now living virtually one life. They were together all of the time. At night they slept together in Mike's cabin, Mike under the covers, Rattles outside of the covers, in minimum concession to family protests, but with his back tight against Mike's. The cabin door was kept wide open. Sometimes Mike woke in the middle of the night, the friendly familiar pressure suddenly absent from his back, and standing in the open door he would watch Rattles out there in the middle of the yard, staunch on spread legs, facing the darkness and its perils, and challenging with his voice the hidden enemies

of the House. The dog's voice rose and rose till it reached a strange falsetto, and finally an answer came back from the far hills—far-away coyote howls melted together by distance into a boiling and bubbling, pitched exactly to Rattles' challenge.

Rattles' duty performed, the two would get back to bed, and again Mike would sleep with the warm protective pressure against his back.

At school, Rattles would wait, with utter patience, under the one little oak tree in the yard. At the ringing of the final bell, they were off, down to the beach—Mike throwing sticks far out in the surf, and Rattles bringing them back. Down to the lagoon to swim and bask in the sun; or to fish, when the steelheads were running. Or, tired of the sea, they often tramped up into the hills, to hunt for bee-trees, or even to pick flowers, very useful to a small boy ("Here, Ma, I've brought you some flowers") usually home late for dinner.

But worry gnawed at Mike's heart. Out of that early tussle with Rattles on the kitchen porch, Mike's father emerged well pleased with himself.

"I certainly broke the dog of *that* habit, eh, Mike?"

"You certainly did, Father."

"Sorry I had to be harsh. But one has to be harsh at times, eh, Mike?"

"Yes s-s-sir," said Mike resolutely.

Michael, Sr.'s, satisfaction, however, was based on illusion. The violent lesson administered to the pup that dreadful night had had only a moderate effect. Rattles, now a grown dog—and the best of pals—had begun to do it again.

He didn't seem to be able to help it. Under some mysterious irritation—just as everything seemed to be going well—suddenly twisting, he would snap out with his long white fangs. Immediately he was sorry, terribly sorry, but the thing had been done.

"What is that rag you have around your finger?" Mike's mother would say at dinner.

"Caught my finger on a nail," Mike would say. "Taint anything!"

SOMETIMES, in periods of relaxation between stretches of play, Mike pondered over the problem. He would be lying on the hillside above the house, in the wild oats, his head on Rattles, who for the time being would be a pillow. "He's got one little bad spot in him, and he can't help it," Mike would think. "He's the best pal, he loves me, he does everything I want, but he's got that one little bad spot!"

Remembering the ranch up the Cachagua, and the pack of half-wild dogs, recalling Rattles' barking at night and the answering howls of the hill coyotes, he would be on the edge of a biological discovery.

"He can't help it," he would say to himself. "'Taint his fault."

Rattles did it before he could stop himself, that was what! And he was sorry soon as he'd done it. The way he went flat along the ground, as if he wanted to sink into it! He went flat as a rug he wanted you to step on. The way he squirmed from side to side like a lizard, showing how sorry he was!

Thinking thus, Mike would feel his secret fear sharpen. Turning over on his stomach, he would convert Rattles from a pillow to an audience. "Rattles!" he cried into the dog's face. "You've got to stop it! Suppose someone finds out—suppose *Father* finds out!"

Rattles was flat on the ground by that time; Rattles was squirming. "He'll take you away from me!" Mike shrieked. "You've got to stop it!"

Rattles wormed forward till his head was abjectly between Mike's hands.

Mike dropped his voice. "Yes, I know. You won't do it again. It's all right, Rattles."

"Wow!" Rattles barked, released and happy.

Then, just a few days later maybe, it would happen again. It might be during a romp, Rattles getting too excited. Or his brain, maybe, got too tired while you were teaching him a new trick. At dinner-time Mike heard the familiar question:

"What is the matter with your hand, Mike?"

"Oh, I was whittling. I cut myself, a little bit."

That was the weight that Mike was carrying while looking so careless and free, while exploring with Rattles all the joys and wonders of a world still fresh and new.

"Gee, just suppose Father found out!"

But they were being lucky, he and Rattles. They were not being found out. That summer vacation. Mike built an "express" wagon. He had gradually collected the material—four wheels, almost of equal size, two iron rods that would make axles, a packing-box that could be whittled down for the wagon body. All summer he toiled in the backyard, down on both knees in creative fervor, circling and circling the rising masterpiece, hammer and screwdriver in hand, nails and screws in his mouth, while Rattles patiently dozed near by, till the wagon stood finished, its minor deficiencies glossed over under a brilliant coat of red paint. The harness, made out of

short lengths of clothesline and bits of leather, was fitted directly on Rattles, and they were ready for the first trials. Prudently, Mike moved these away from the house, to a clearing in the pines, out of sight.

Everything went well at first. Rattles was taking to his new function with enthusiasm. He galloped in his harness; the wagon rolled like a fire engine as Mike ran alongside, enchanted. They'd stop.

"We're having fun, eh, Rattles?"

But the harness became tangled. Straightening it, Mike accidentally pinched Rattles. There was a flash of teeth, and across the back of Mike's hand a red line appeared.



Mike holding Rattles came up again. Tiburcio was holding out his hand.

Rattles had sunk down between the shafts in his usual shivering remorse, but Mike, on his knees, was holding himself very still. Suddenly a feeling had come to him that he and Rattles were no longer alone—that eyes were upon them. He was holding himself very still, hoping that the eyes would not be sure of what they had seen.

The sense of being watched increased. He slipped a sly look backward under his arm. And back there, between the pines on the edge of the clearing, his father was quietly standing.

Mike withdrew his glance, and froze himself yet more still. But it was becoming harder and harder to stay still like that. Finally he shot back another guarded glance. Now no one was there. His father had vanished.

After that Mike worried more than ever. He wondered how much his father had seen of what had happened in the clearing; he watched the man closely without seeming to. At times, he felt that his father was acting strangely. He was being very quiet; he seemed to be turning something over in his mind.

MIKE kept Rattles close all the time now, as he watched and listened.

Then one morning Tiburcio Valdez, up from his cabin down the coast, came riding into the yard with his two pack-horses, and settled his camp under the big buckeye, as he did always on his rare visits to town to replenish his store of bacon, coffee, flour, salt, sugar, shotgun and rifle shells. He lived on a sidehill in the wilds down the coast and was a great trapper and hunter. Mike's father went down there twice a year to hunt and fish with him. Standing by his father, Mike watched Tiburcio throw off his saddles and saddle-bags, then send his three animals into the corral with a big slap. Mike's father and Tiburcio now vanished into the studio. Soon a sound of clinking glasses came from there, of voices rumbling in hunting-yarns, of sudden bursts of laughter.

It was a fine day to go to the beach or to the lagoon, but an uneasiness kept Mike near, and thus it was that

at sundown, he was sitting with Rattles between his knees, against the studio wall, under the open window. Within, they were talking low now; it was Tiburcio who was speaking in his soft California-Spanish way.

"You're right, Michael," he was saying to Mike's father. "He's got to be done away with. I will do it for you. I know just how to do it. I'll do it when he is having fun. One minute he will be all fun, the next minute he will be nothing."

"I hate to have it done," said Mike's father, "but we've got to do it."

"Sure," said Tiburcio. "We got to do it."

The mysterious words had stirred a dim terror in Mike. As he took Rattles into the cabin with him that night, he shut the door, which he usually kept open. But in the middle of the night, awakened by Rattles' restless scratching, he forgot. Staggering with sleep, he opened the door to let the dog out for his nightly barking and his coyote communing. And when he awoke in the morning, with the door still wide open, no Rattles was about.

Standing in the open doorway, he whistled—but there was no answer. He tiptoed to Tiburcio's tent; the flap was open, and the sleeping-bag was empty. But there was worse. In the dust, Tiburcio's tracks led across the yard to the head of the trail that went down to the sea, and next to Tiburcio's broad marks the little trefoil prints of Rattles' paws showed clearly.

Mike rushed back to his cabin, slapped on his shoes without taking time to lace them, and in his pajamas ran down the trail toward the sea's low growl. He was sniveling a bit with foreboding. The sea's roar grew louder; he came to the dunes—and threw himself down on his stomach. Tiburcio was standing just ahead. Tiburcio had a long heavy stick; he threw it far out in the water, and Mike could hear Rattles' joyous barking below.

The surf was heavy. Wall after wall of liquid emerald rose slowly, poised, broke, and came down in a welter of foam. Mike could see the stick Tiburcio had thrown, on top of

the sharp top of a new charging wave. He could see Rattles, in the shallows below. He saw Rattles spot the stick. Up the long emerald slope Rattles swam, breasting the water strongly; barking deliriously, he reached the crest and the stick.

Tiburcio stooped, and came up with his rifle. He pushed the stock into a boulder, and aimed.

In a long leap Mike went hurtling into Tiburcio's legs. . . .

Mike heard a crash above him, the whipping *zing* of a rifle-shot. Tiburcio was now lying on top of him. He squirmed free and went running down to the water's edge.

The big wave had broken; a sheet of soapy water was hissing toward Mike's feet, and there was no Rattles anywhere. Then the dog reappeared, bobbing up in the foam. But he was no longer barking, he was no longer swimming. Lying on his side, he was making weak movements with his legs; he was going around and around in a small circle.

The foam was sucking back, and Rattles was going out with it. . . . Out, out. . . . A new wave gathered, rose into a wall, and Rattles, swept up to its apex, appeared sharply against the sky, then came rolling down the inward slope as the wave collapsed. Now he was inside the line of breakers once more, in the hissing foam, still on his side, making those weak movements with his legs, going around and around in a small circle.

"Rattles!" Mike shrieked, and ran out into the water.

AT first it was only to his knees. Then it was higher; and he was advancing only in successive bounds started from both feet. It was up to his chin when he got his hands on Rattles and drew the dog tightly to him. He had just time to glimpse, above him, an emerald wall poised so high he could not believe it; then a ponderous cataract came down on his head.

Great angry hands had him. They were shaking him ragefully. They were hurling him this way and that, they were hurling him up and then down, they were hammering him

A GIFT *particularly welcome* to SERVICEMEN!

Tattered, well-thumbed copies of BLUE BOOK—in field libraries, post exchanges and elsewhere on ship and shore—prove better than words its popularity with our fighting men!

Service subscriptions cost only \$2 for one year instead of the \$2.50 paid by civilians.

Hand this coupon to your newsdealer or mail to

BLUE BOOK Magazine, Dept. JWS
McCall Street, Dayton 1, Ohio

☐ \$2.50 for 1 yr. for civilians ☐ \$2 for 1 yr. for Armed Forces ☐ \$4 for 2 yrs. for everybody

Subscriber's

Name.....

Subscriber's

Address.....

City &

State.....

FOR OVERSEAS APO ADDRESSES, SOLDIER'S OWN REQUEST NECESSARY



Mike didn't answer. Curled up over his dog, he was quietly weeping.

against the bottom—but he was still holding on to his dog. He came up, had time for just one breath, then down he went again, swirled around like a rag, beaten against the bottom, but still holding on to his dog. He came up, and the shore was nearer. He came up again, and the shore was nearer still. He came up once more and Tiburcio, a hill-man who couldn't swim, was standing up to his waist in the backwash, and holding out his hand.

Mike seized the hand, and still one with Rattles, felt himself drawn high up on the beach. He lay on his stomach by the side of Rattles, and he was very tired.

"All right, Mike?" Tiburcio said at length.

"Sure!" said Mike.

Tiburcio, bent over, was inspecting Rattles, who was beginning to squirm weakly. He drew his fingers along the top of the canine skull, where a thin red line was beginning to show. He straightened up, threw back his head,

opened his mouth wide, and let out a loud laugh.

"Creased him, by God!" he laughed. "Even with you in my legs!

"Mike," he said then, "he's just stunned. He's going to be all right."

Mike, leaving behind him a wet trail, trotted after Tiburcio, who was striding back to the house, the dog in his arms. They made for the living-room. Here, in the breakfast-nook, Mike's father and mother were starting on their bacon and eggs. Rattles was set down in the middle of the floor. He stood with legs far apart, swaying gently forward and back like a drunken gentleman about to tell a story, and Tiburcio, preoccupied, sat himself, sopping wet, in the room's only brocade chair.

"Michael," he said to Mike's father, "you know, we cannot do it, what we

were going to do. Your thinking, it is all right. That dog, it was all right to think we should do that. But that boy, he's got something more powerful than just thinking. That boy, he's got love for that bad dog. No, we cannot do it, what we were going to do—"

There was a silence. The interrupted breakfasters were staring, wide eyed, at the dripping trio.

Light suddenly illuminated Tiburcio's dark face.

"I know!" he cried. "Let me take the dog with me. I will take him

*Illustrated
by John E.
Costigan, N. A.*

down to my shack and I will train him. I am good at training animals."

Mike had taken his dog in his arms and was now curled up in another chair, the big wet animal on his lap.

"I know!" Tiburcio cried, for the second time. "Let me take the boy too—for a month. I will teach him to fish and hunt and trap. And to train things and make flapjacks. How about it, Mike?"

But Mike couldn't answer. Curled up over his dog, he was quietly weeping.

"Creasing that dog's skull," Tiburcio went on, meditating deeply, "you know, maybe it did some good. Maybe it scrambled up that funny brain some. Maybe it will be easy to train him now—eh, Mike?"

Mike stopped crying and, nodding, began to laugh.

A WARRIOR GOES HOME

A Twice-told Tale from the September, 1932, issue, by Meigs Frost

BRENDA QUISTGAARD still sits behind the cashier's little desk in the New Orleans corner grocery, where the historians of that city of many historians overlook her completely. None of those historians could lead you to that corner grocery on a bet.

Some of them undoubtedly once read of Clarence Tolley. But they have forgotten him. The newspaper editions roll so often; daily there are new headlines. Anyway, historians fix their eyes on the past.

Romance is dead in New Orleans, they tell you. They point you out the spots where Romance died. Busily they write about those spots. The Vieux Carré, where French and Spanish trod narrow streets in steel and silk and lace, leaving behind moldering walls, iron grilles, courtyards, memories. The battlefield at Chalmette, where Andrew Jackson fought shoulder to shoulder with Lafitte's swarthy pirates, against the redcoats. The Mississippi River, where vanished the pageant of the packets. The dueling oaks, where slim rapiers clashed and smoothbore pistols cracked at dawn.

New Orleans takes Romance once a year synthetically, they tell you, in the tinsel of Mardi Gras.

Nature gave Clarence Tolley the protective coloration she gives so many of her powerless, inoffensive children. You could have passed Clarence on the street half a dozen times a day without remembering him five minutes later. If the police had ever been forced to telegraph his description, the result of their message to the detectives of any other city could have been the picking up of enough youths to fill that city's hotels instead of its jails.

Clarence's hair was just hair-colored hair. His eyes were neither pronouncedly blue nor gray, black nor brown. His height and weight were just average for his age of nineteen. He bore no distinguishing marks nor scars. He wore what a million other youngsters wear these days when America refuses to provide tourists with quaint peasant costumes.

He was born in what New Orleans knows as a shotgun cottage. When you open the front door you look straight down the barrel through liv-

ing-room, bedrooms, bath, dining-room, and you see the kitchen sink at the far end. They come single-barrel and double-barrel. New Orleans has more miles of them than Baltimore has of white doorsteps leading from the street to white doors in red brick walls, or New York has brownstone fronts. They are cheap and unlovely. In the one where he was born, Clarence grew up with the same schooling, the same amusements, the same appearance, as thousands of other undistinguished New Orleans boys.

He scraped through high school on one of those seventy-to-seventy-one averages that barely give a kid a diploma to frame. He got a job in the corner grocery three blocks from his home.

There, in these unheroic surroundings, was born in Clarence's heart this thing that set him apart from the common run of man. For there Clarence began to get daily close-ups of Brenda Quistgaard, the cashier.

Though Brenda's hair was blonde and her eyes were blue and her skin clear and her features not too haphazard, Brenda wasn't Miss New Orleans in any bathing-beauty contest, not by five hundred statute miles. But Brenda looked great to Clarence. And in her heart burned a clear flame that changed the world for him. Let the genealogical and biological experts explain whether it came from Viking ancestry through a Norwegian sailor who jumped ship at New Orleans, became a stevedore, settled down and married, and in due time became Brenda's father—or whether it just happened as so many entrancing human qualities do. But Brenda was a born daughter of battle.

Had she lived in the Rome of the Caesars, you'd have found Brenda in the front row at the arena, leaning forward, lips slightly parted, eyes eager, breathing hard, when gladiators died. Had her home been Camelot and she of high degree, her sleeve or glove would have gone floating down the lists on the helmet of her champion, when knights in armor jousting for glory and the reward soft eyes and softer lips bring after the fight is over.

But Brenda lived in New Orleans in the Twentieth Century; so she took it out in athletics. Brenda simply

adored football and baseball, basketball, boxing and track.

As Clarence's diffident courtship progressed, most of his pay, outside the board he paid his mother weekly, went for tickets to spectacles where lithe-muscled athletes leaped and thudded against each other or raced against time; where the rough roaring shouts and the fighting songs of battle-adoring humanity rose to open skies or to raftered roofs where billowed dense clouds of tobacco-smoke.

Night football and baseball and track meets beneath floodlights on a college campus in New Orleans were gifts of the high gods to Brenda and Clarence.

That was when the bright-tinted bubble of desire for courage and victory in battle began to swell in Clarence's heart with the passing of days and nights of this new, wonderful life into which Brenda led him. To be the kind of guy Brenda ought to have—

Dumbly Clarence knew that Brenda was great. Brenda's kisses left you tingling. There was a girl! Brenda didn't just let herself be kissed—she met you more than halfway. Brenda deserved a guy who— Well, she deserved a regular guy—that's what Brenda had coming to her.

In Clarence's heart began to rise a great inarticulate tide of love which bore that bright-tinted bubble on its breast. With that tide ambition rose.

IF he could only lay in Brenda's lap one good offering of the fighting courage she adored! Just one!

It couldn't be football or track or baseball. Clarence's school days were over, his college days never would be, and he had been a dub at all three sports in high school. Nor could it be the ring. There wasn't a boy in the block who couldn't hand him a sleeping-powder with either mitt in the first minute of the first round. Clarence's first, last and only fight back in high-school days had taught him he had a glass jaw.

It worried Clarence. Courage in combat became the obsession of his life, looming before his eyes amid the tiers of canned baked beans, the smell of cold boiled ham and Swiss cheese, the crates of tomatoes and lettuce.

Though he was in love with a daughter of Norway, Clarence never had heard, or if he had heard, had forgotten, the tale of the shock troops of Viking days. Yet no shield-biting, mouth-foaming, sword-swinging Berserker of King Harold's time ever thought of battle by day, dreamed of battle by night, more than Clarence the grocery clerk.

Then on a news-stand he saw one day a magazine cover that showed a Western gun-fighter at bay, his six-shooter spitting flame. Clarence bought it. He plunged into adventurous fiction. Now another new world opened to him.

NIGHTLY, when not with Brenda, he sailed the Seven Seas. He battled killers in tropic jungles, and in the barren wastes of the frozen

North where Men are Men. On Western plains he shot it out with bad men in little cow-towns. He rode with galloping posses. He dropped rustlers from the saddle with grim unsmiling face and effortless ease as he fanned his trusty six-gun or snapped his rifle to his shoulder. He plunged through blizzards with his dog-sled, toward the Great Slave Lake, a lone Mountie in scarlet tunic beneath his furs—and he always got his man. He quelled mutinies on the grimed, greasy decks of rusty, wallowing freighters, dropping the leader with a shot from the bridge, where he commanded in crisp white.

Thus his dreams. But in real life it began to look hopeless.

Then he stumbled on a story of a man who had found in a pawnshop window an ancient, ivory-handled pistol; on its steel was engraved:

*Be not afraid of any man
However large his size.
When trouble threatens, call on me,
And I will equalize.*

A thought was born to Clarence. And luckily, as he saw it, for a few weeks later at the store two of the clerks went down with the flu. Work was so hard for the rest of them that when evening came both Brenda and Clarence were too tired to go anywhere but home. So Clarence had a little more money in his pocket than usual. And with his head full of dreams of the Equalizer, Clarence went down to "Pawnshop Row" on South Rampart Street one evening and nosed around.

He emerged presently with the biggest, blackest .45 six-shooter in the shop. He had bought a worn shoul-

BLUE BOOK'S CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Edited by
Albert H. Morehead

In these puzzles the definitions combine true synonym of the word with a clue to the spelling of the word; but the phrasing of synonym and clue is intentionally misleading. The trick of solving is to disregard the apparent meaning and

try to figure out which part of the definition is synonym and which part is clue. For example, anagrams: "Pieces of eight" defines *specie*, of which word *pieces* is an anagram. Hidden words spell out the defined word as parts of other words: *Hide*

each plan" defines *idea*. The enigma type of definition plays on the syllables in a word: "I put in ad for help" is *aid*, since "I" is put into "ad." Puns, backward spellings, and straight dictionary definitions are also used. (Solution on page 87)

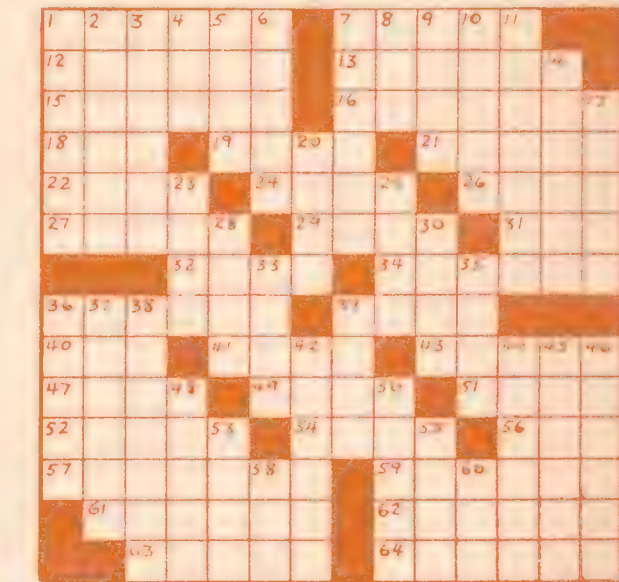
ACROSS

- 1 Located outside Asia, but mixed up inside
- 7 The double-yous spell strength
- 12 Fatal result when a lot arm
- 13 Air in the lee, backwards, and in the air forwards
- 15 The magician calls for a change in the poster
- 16 More easily broken
- 18 Dad is to put things together
- 19 Hose with punch in it
- 21 Pet is result of malice
- 22 Legends no end to describe a Gable feature
- 24 The election comes to a head
- 26 Bristle found in the East
- 27 "We have met the —," Perry
- 29 Two pages
- 31 End of the boy's name
- 32 How Duse was employed
- 34 Father's attempt to make cake
- 36 Garret put into order for the night
- 39 The continent for anyone listed as I A
- 40 Europe without 'ope is cause for regret
- 41 This sort of rash is cheerful
- 43 Raises change—from 1/2 a C to a G—for gifts
- 47 Have a yen for a chit?
- 49 'Tues. is oddly fat in meat
- 51 Can't run for Dartmouth if you fail the oval
- 52 Take broth to restore pulse
- 54 The battle was lost, and all for the want of this

- 56 Vehicle that becomes opera with added men
- 57 Growing cross, is always grousin'
- 59 De face is familiar, but I can't recall de main
- 61 Did err, got caught by the exterminator
- 62 Such dodges make Eve sad
- 63 Yes, tease the grouchy!
- 64 Resident et out in inexpensive joints

DOWN

- 1 I'm pale when you run me through
- 2 Renowned, we leave to arrange for assistance in bombing
- 3 Gets on edge after the doctor makes him dig up
- 4 I tease for the thing's
- 5 Tries out treatises on leeds
- 6 Polo's confusing to a sailer
- 7 What Kate and Elsie use for fishing
- 8 I left the heir in possession of the girl
- 9 Goddess discordantly brings up her father
- 10 Whispers left her with a few straws
- 11 Very knowing about pants
- 14 Hide the scarlet term
- 17 Are you all set, deary?
- 20 Unresponsive as a clod
- 23 Must reading for the puerient
- 25 Projections in the Alps
- 28 Yes!, it's a river
- 30 The Italian after the fourth note must have no success



- 33 Long, irregular ears
- 35 Remarked that I'd gone after S. A.
- 36 Grist ground up into grain
- 37 Hour at which, wildly, the audience calls for the playwright
- 38 Muster
- 39 In midocean
- 42 "No — generations tread thee down;" *Keats*
- 44 Ad staring you in the face
- 45 Carter is the detective to find the skipper
- 46 I say emphatically that I hide in distress
- 48 Herod dispersed the mob
- 50 Tied Ed, I hear, but carried him
- 53 The bridge club, I'd say, conceals these
- 55 Hebrew priest takes the veil
- 58 Any tea spells profit
- 60 Tank fires; strike out

der-holster too, and two boxes of cartridges. Tom Mix was never better equipped for foiling a cattle-rustling, heroine-kidnaping villain of the badlands west of the Pecos!

FOR a while thereafter, Brenda got excuses instead of entertainment. Clarence explained that he was studying a correspondence-school course in accounting. Brenda thought that was grand. But nightly in his bedroom,—behind a locked door and facing the mirror on his dresser,—Clarence was practising the lightning draw. Fifty times each evening, by laborious count, he dragged out that heavy revolver, cocked it, and snapped it on an empty cylinder, at the figure of his enemy there in the glass. Sundays he took the street-car to the Napoleon Avenue ferry, crossed the Mississippi, and trudged down the west bank Barataria Road. There in solitude he fired shot after shot at the trees that lined the silent bayou.

Clarence never got to the point where he could out-shoot Billy the Kid. Few grocery clerks in their spare time win to such deadly coordination of wrist and grip, squeeze and eye. But Clarence was somewhat pleased with himself, at that. He began to hit the trees. Then he began to hit newspaper pages he pinned on the trees.

Daily, now, to get what he called to himself "the feel of the gun," Clarence went to work with that shoulder-holster and heavy gun under his coat—which, in New Orleans' climate, can be a very damp and uncomfortable practice. But it was centuries ago that man discovered arms and armor are a proud burden!

Gun and holster hung under his coat in a dark little lavatory, while he was on the job. Fortunately, nobody in the grocery store happened to discover it.

Clarence went out with Brenda again now, from time to time. All he needed, all he wanted, was opportunity. Some thug, some bunch of hoodlums—if they'd only accost Brenda and him on a dark street some night! Some Chicago or New York gangster in New Orleans for the races—if he'd only start something with Brenda, and Clarence around! The pictures kept flashing through Clarence's mind. The courteous, grave, slow draw of those gun-fighters of the Western plains:

"Take yore hand off that young lady, you coyote! I'm waitin' for you to draw. No varmint like you ought to get an even break, but I'm givin' you one."

And then: "*The two weapons spoke as with a single shot.*"

It was a hectic life Clarence was living, deep down inside himself. He was nearly bursting with his secret. But he wouldn't tell Brenda: this offering

would be laid in her lap as a complete surprise when it came.

Then, as Hollywood's subtitles used to tell us: "Came the day."

Clarence had been unromantically handling subdivisions of ripe Camembert for a fussy customer. Satisfied at last, the fussy one departed. Clarence stepped into the little lavatory to scrub his hands—Camembert was a cheese that lingered if you let it. Through the half-open door he heard the commotion and the sharp voice, just as he was drying his hands. He looked over his shoulder out into the store.

"Line up over there! Against that wall! Make it snappy, you!" the sharp voice was saying. A chunky black automatic was backing up the order. The man who held it wore a yellow oilskin slicker. He had a blue bandanna handkerchief tied around his face, only his eyes showing between bandanna and hat brim.

Just beyond the man, through the open door to the street, Clarence caught a glimpse of a car standing at the curb, the engine running, at the wheel, a youth in overalls and down-pulled cap, leaning to peer sharply through the door at what was going on inside. And toward the cashier's little desk another overalled and bandanna-masked figure was striding, gun in hand—toward Brenda!

Clarence knew them instantly. The papers had been full of the raids of a mysterious trio on outlying groceries, drug stores, filling-stations. The darkness of the little lavatory had kept them from seeing Clarence.

Clarence rubbed his hands swiftly on his thighs, lest any slippery soap might remain. Clarence's face became as grim and unsmiling as any Western gun-fighter's. Suddenly there was a queer, shaky feeling inside him. But he reached over under his coat, hanging there, for the loaded gun. He felt the shaky feeling vanish as he gripped the rough butt. He felt a hot surge of something else take its place. The Equalizer!

Clarence cocked the weapon and stepped out through the lavatory door. That was the exact moment Brenda, through some hysterical twitch of nerves, made an involuntary movement that scared the young hold-up amateur advancing on her on the cash register.

"Yuh would, would yuh!" he snarled. He leaped and struck her on the side of the head with the barrel of his automatic.

CLARENCE fired. He aimed at the stomach, as he had read gun-fighters do, and the bandit dropped with a shattered thigh as the big pistol roared like a cannon inside those walls. It roared again as Clarence wheeled and fired through the door at

the figure seated behind the steering-wheel of the car. The youth screamed and fell backward. Clarence's bullet had missed him, but it splintered the windshield glass.

Clarence continued his swift pivot. He hoped to plant his third bullet in the body of the third stick-up man, who had lost his interest in holding the five customers in line against the wall, and had just fired once at Clarence, shattering a window.

This time it was just as Clarence had read about it, often, in those adventurous tales—"*The two weapons spoke as with a single shot.*"

But the sharp crack of the .38 automatic came a split second ahead of the bellow of the old .45 six-shooter.

Clarence collapsed to the floor, his head resting prosaically among spilled potatoes. . . .

But his head was in Brenda's lap and she was kissing him and crying, her arms clutching him convulsively, when Motorcycle Patrolman Michael Coyle, who had heard the shooting as he was headed uptown on traffic patrol, came speeding down the street and leaping toward the store entrance—to drop the third bandit on the sidewalk, just as the bandit emptied the rest of his clip—and missed.

Clarence wasn't tingling to Brenda's kisses, now. Clarence was dead. He would never even read the headlines about himself in the New Orleans newspapers.

A warrior had gone home.

THE old Norse warriors made a pleasant heaven for themselves, calling it Valhalla. There abode Odin, greatest of the gods. Valhalla, his hall, was vast. It had five hundred and forty entrances, each so wide that eight hundred heroes could march through abreast.

Outside were broad, level fields, splendid for combat. There warriors who died in battle could fight again, with worthy foes, from dawn to eve, through all eternity. Each sunset all wounds miraculously were healed. The warriors trooped joyously back into Valhalla. They spent the night in revelry. They drained huge horns of mead. They were served and loved by blonde beauties, milk-white of skin, rose-red of lips, sea-blue of eyes.

And over the battlefields of this earth soared on shining wings the Valkyries, beautiful, alluring women in armor rich with gold and gems. They snatched the souls of gallant warriors as sword-hands sank in death. They bore them aloft through cloudless blue to Valhalla and its eternal joys. . . .

Romance is dead in New Orleans. There is no man who will tell you the Valkyries ever soared on shining wings above a corner grocery there. . . . Page the Valkyries for Clarence!

FORWARD OBSERVER

This book is the first authentic inside story of field artillery reconnaissance—one of the most dangerous jobs in the army. . . . Greater love had no man, for example, than Rick Hallon, who called down fire on his own position in order to stop the enemy.

by Edwin V. Westrate

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every combat incident recorded here is authentic but, for military reasons, the real identity of the participants, their outfits and the exact location of their exploits may not be revealed as yet. So the names Kennard, Hallon, Johns, Warren, Byrnes and the rest seemed as good as any. Names of field commanders and of Fort Sill officers mentioned are, of course, their own.

KENNARD—JAMES KENNARD, first lieutenant, Field Artillery—was brought back to the United States from Africa on a stretcher, by airplane. His radio operator, Barney Johns, technician 5, occupied another stretcher on the same plane. They had been wounded within a few minutes of each other somewhere near Bizerte while on a special mission they had undertaken together. It was the second time Johns had been wounded, the fourth for Kennard. Jack Warren, who had been Kennard's first instrument corporal, was in the same hospital when they arrived. He had preceded them by a week or two, both as to the time he was wounded—his second time, also—and his return across the Atlantic.

One day, after Kennard was able to sit up in bed for a few minutes at a time, a general came to the hospital and pinned a Distinguished Service Cross on him. He did not seem particularly excited about it. The only time his face lighted was when he was told Johns was receiving the same decoration. Warren already was wearing the Silver Star for Bravery, awarded him in Africa some days before he was hit by the four machine-gun bullets which had sent him back to the United States.

These three and one other who is still in Africa had been the original members of one of those little-known, almost fabulous groups which haunt the farthest reaches of the battle fronts with Death riding their shoulders at every step—the forward observer details. Kennard's quartet had been the forward observer detail of Battery C, —th Battalion of light field artillery—105 millimeter howitzers—operating in direct support of the infantry.

When they were well enough to move about in wheel chairs, Warren and Johns spent most of their time around Kennard's bed. Their attitude toward each other was not much that of officer and subordinates. They seemed to be just intimate friends with a deep respect for each other and the comradeship of men who have been through hell together.

Kennard looks considerably older than he is. He was very young when he landed in Africa but so much happened to him and around him and because of him that he aged many years in the six months between November

8, 1942 and the May day when the Americans catapulted into Bizerte. To a lesser degree, the same is true of Warren and Johns.

When the three are together, they sometimes reminisce but mostly they talk about going back to the outfit. Kennard discounts completely the dismal medical opinion which questions whether he will emerge from the hospital without a permanent limp, much less return to combat. He himself says he will be as good as new, if for no other reason than that he has to be.

He will, too. He is that kind. It takes his kind to do the job he learned so well and he knows the American Army does not yet have enough of him to finish the enormous task still ahead.

There are only four men in a forward observer detail—the forward observer, who is a commissioned officer (usually the battery reconnaissance officer), and three enlisted men—an instrument corporal, a wire telephone operator and a radio operator. In the North African campaign, American casualties were less than twenty per cent of the total American forces engaged. During the same period, Kennard's detail suffered more than three hundred per cent casualties, not to mention minor wounds which kept men off duty only a day or two.

That is what forward observer service is like.

This is not the story of the Tunisian campaign. It is just the story—as it was told from hospital cot and wheel chair—of Lieutenant Kennard and the men of his detail and what happened to them as they learned how to make war.

IV

WHILE we were in England, we kept right on training, trying to polish the rough spots as best we could. . . .

Actually, we weren't in England very long. Almost before we knew it, we were aboard ship again as part of that big convoy to Africa. And, almost the minute we set foot on shore, we found ourselves fighting.

We can't tell you much about the grand strategy and the broad tactical maneuvers of the Tunisian campaign. We were through it all the way but nobody knows as little about a battle as the men who are in it. All we actually saw of it was what happened right around us. That kept us so busy we didn't have time even to ask about the rest of it.

When we started, all we knew was that General Eisenhower was trying to reach Tunis and Bizerte before the Axis had time to bring in enough reinforcements to stop

Published by THE BLAKISTON COMPANY, Philadelphia
Distributed by E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC., New York
Copyright, 1944, by Edwin V. Westrate.

us. We would have made it, too, if it hadn't been for the unspeakable weather we ran into and the way we had to stretch our supply lines so fast and so far over country which didn't have enough roads to maintain a division, to say nothing of a couple of armies.

The FO jeep was all spick and span and packed very neatly the day we started. It didn't stay pretty long, although it always had to be packed right because of the amount of stuff we had to carry. Even with perfect packing only three men can ride in the FO jeep. The instrument corporal drives, the RO rides with him in the front seat and the radio operator squeezes in the back with the equipment. That makes it necessary for the telephone man to ride on the battery wire truck but that works out all right. It keeps him posted on the battery telephone lines and makes it easier and quicker for him to hook the FO line to the battery wire head when we're in the field.

So it was Warren and John's and myself in the jeep. As we went along, we heard plenty of rumors about meeting opposition in Algeria, but nothing happened. It was a good deal like a long training hike.

We were very sure of ourselves—too sure. Nothing could stop us. We knew everything about how to smash the Nazis. Besides, we were Americans, which automatically gave us two strikes on every other gang in the world. That's how most of us felt. The trouble was too many seemed to think Americans had some special kind of body which couldn't be damaged by Nazi ammunition. . . .

IT WAS ABOUT TEN O'CLOCK when the first air alarm came from the head of the column, miles up front, announcing enemy planes headed our way. That meant get off the road quick and head for anything that looked like cover, then scramble away from the vehicle. Every truck in the column made a break to one side or the other but a lot of them still were in motion when the planes peeled off and swooped down on the column, dropping their eggs as they dived.

Warren drove the jeep into a patch of woods to the right of the road and we had just time to jump out when the first plane went by, ripping at everything in sight. Every anti-aircraft gun in the column was throwing lead into the air and making a lot of racket but none of the planes even slowed down.

There was a double explosion down the line and when the smoke cleared, we could see one of our trucks burning. When the sound of exploding bombs died away, we took a look from the edge of the trees and then ducked right back. The Jerries weren't leaving us. They zoomed up, circled and came back, this time blazing away with their machine guns.

One of them dived our way and strafed our hide-out, just on general principles, I suppose. He came so low, Jack and Barney were popping at him with their carbines and I was firing my automatic. That day I first began to inkle what a silly combat weapon it is. The Jerry didn't hit anything but neither did we and we didn't care much for a tie score. Through the whole business we felt like fish in a barrel and we didn't like it.

Our machine guns still were going at top speed and the only consolation we had was that one of the planes was damaged and was wobbling as it pulled out of the fight.

When we came up for air, we found the battery had lost just the one truck and there had been no one in it. One man had had his leg gashed by a bomb splinter but all he needed was a little first aid. Farther up the line, we could see half a dozen trucks burning and we heard there had been a number of casualties.

We were under way again in about ten minutes but our necks began to stiffen from keeping our faces toward the sky. All at once, we were very airplane conscious, espe-

cially conscious that we had not seen one of our own all morning and we wondered why.

We were still wondering about noon when the Jerries came back and brought some friends and relatives with them. We had our alarm a bit earlier this time and we broke off the road faster but the strafing was much worse than we'd had in the morning. The country was absolutely open. There wasn't a sign of anything that might give us protection. Warren headed straight off the road at a right angle, giving the jeep everything it would take. We were a good two hundred yards over when the rattle of machine guns told us trouble had arrived. We stopped where we were, jumped out and scattered.

All we could do was flatten out with our faces in the dirt and pray for luck. Looking up at a time like that is very unhealthy so we didn't see the plane swoop down directly over us but we heard it. It sounded so low we thought it was going to scrape us off the ground and, for the first time, we heard that nasty hist! a machine-gun bullet makes on its way past your ear. The best thing about that was that we heard it, which meant it had missed.

The racket was terrific. Machine guns were going and bombs were dropping but we kept our heads down. It seemed an endless time before the roar of the airplane motors began to fade and we knew this session was over.

When I stood up and headed for the jeep, the first thing I heard was Warren using a lot of two-dollar cuss words. He was trotting toward our buggy and pointing at the wheels. Neither he nor John's had been hurt but the Heinie had given us two flat tires. There were half a dozen bullet scars on the body of the car, too.

We could see some fires up ahead and one or two behind us which meant more trucks had taken a beating but our battery hadn't lost any this time. Then, and for the rest of the African campaign, we became known as the "lucky" battery because, in normal action our casualties always seemed lighter than those of other outfits. But it wasn't luck. In six months of combat, I've seen quite a number of those so-called "lucky" outfits but their only luck was having commanders who knew how to make their men take every possible precaution. Rick was one of those.

In this second strafing we had one man killed—our only casualty—because he was tired of keeping his head down. When he raised himself on one arm to see what was going on, he was hit by a bomb splinter which wouldn't have touched him if he'd stayed flat. Rick felt badly about it, practically deciding it was his fault because one of his men hadn't had sense enough to obey orders.

When we finally were under way again, there was a good deal of grumbling because our own fliers seemed to be letting the Jerries have a Roman holiday at our expense, but there wasn't time to explain to every man in the column that our air forces were just beginning to organize captured airfields and that, at that time, practically all of our air support still was carrier based. What bothered us most was that the strafings indicated the enemy already had a lot of planes in Tunisia, which meant they probably had a lot of other stuff, too.

It was about fifteen hundred—three o'clock—when they came back for the third time. We were in hilly country now and managed to get our jeep into fair defilade. When we jumped out, Warren said, "This is getting monotonous. A little more of it and we'll be in a rut."

A lot of things were different this time, though. I guess the gang which had hit us before had spread the word there was nothing to fear from our flak, so this crowd came in low, almost as if they were contemptuous of us, which was a mistake. We may be a little ignorant when we start but we learn fast. This time, our machine guns began to concentrate their fire. The first plane swooped by without being hurt but the second took a full load of our fire. It worked. The plane zoomed

almost straight up, wobbled as if it were off balance when it straightened out and began stumbling away like a drunken sailor.

Another went by but the fourth sailed straight into all the machine guns could pitch. The airplanes used in this war can collect a lot of lead and still keep flying but our fire must have hit something vital in this one. Its momentum carried it past us; then it seemed almost to stop in midair. Next, it jumped about a hundred feet and a heavy trail of smoke poured from it. The pilot nosed straight up, leveled and swung away to the right of our column, then zoomed up again. There was a terrific explosion and, after that, the plane just wasn't there any more and parts of it were showering all over the landscape.

You could have heard our yell all over Tunisia. The whole thing must have been a shock to the other Jerry planes. All of them climbed, circled for a couple of minutes, then headed for home.

That was our real introduction to the war for which we had come to Africa. . . .

IX

WHEN we reached the front again, it didn't take us long to learn we had left the kindergarten and now were in at least a grade school war. We had beer sent in to strengthen a spot where the Americans were trying to shoulder their way into a better position for the hopoff when the real drive started, and the Jerries weren't giving up any real estate free.

When Rick and I went up for reconnaissance late in the afternoon before we moved in, the doughboys were consolidating a position they had just taken and were beating off attempts to recapture it. We spent a good deal of the time on our faces while enemy fire splashed around, getting the lay of the land and whatever other information we could between shell bursts. We stayed long enough to make sure that part of the country would still be in our hands when the doughboys of our own combat team came up and infantry action had practically stopped when we went back.

The artillery on both flanks of our zone gave us heavy protective fire when we came up after dark but plenty came our way, giving us our first experience in taking up a new position under fire. It wasn't too easy. That was the night we decided to go in for foxholes instead of slit trenches. They felt healthier. Of the detail, Furman had the toughest time. Shellfire broke the telephone lines twice even before he could run them all the way to our observation post and check them through. There wasn't any doubt about it. The Jerries didn't like our holding that ground.

The best thing about the situation was that we were working with Byrnes again. We both felt we had personal scores to settle and hoped to make the first payment in the morning when his company was going to spearhead a try for the next ridge.

It didn't work out quite that way. Shortly before daylight, one of Byrnes' patrols came in and reported hearing tanks assembling and then, fifteen minutes before we were scheduled to start firing our mapped concentrations, the enemy artillery opened up on us with the heaviest fire we had been under so far. I had reported to Rick and the fire direction center, of course, and had been told both the one-o-fives and mediums were standing by to work on the tanks if they attacked.

At the same time, the doughboys moved up their heavy weapons—antitank guns, mortars and cannon—through the shellfire and took advanced positions. It was still too dark to see much of what was going on across the way so when the enemy fire suddenly stepped up, Byrnes sent some flare rockets over no man's land and that wiped

"Forward Observer," by Edwin V. Westrate 63

out all doubt. Tanks—lots of them—were rolling out from their positions and headed in our direction.

The number of them gave us a jolt. This was going to take a different kind of forward observing from any we had done before. Under the flares, Warren and I made a quick guess as to the range and I telephoned it in. The battery salvo was too far over the leading tanks. We pulled down the range enough to allow for the progress of the tanks and called for fire for effect and all our one-o-fives and mediums opened up.

The glare of the bursts showed we were on the tanks. One of them started to burn and, through our binoculars, we could see a couple of men flop out of the turret. The rest kept coming, all of them zigzagging now.

It was getting lighter every second so adjusting fire was easier but it still was tough enough, especially as it was our first whirl at this kind of job. We could see the tanks spread out all the way back to the ridge so we kept our fire where it was until the leading tanks were well out in front of it, then pulled down the range again. Two more tanks were hit and started to burn but this wasn't even a dent in that fleet.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. It was full daylight now and we had pulled the range down twice more but the tanks were still coming and those out front began firing. The doughboys suddenly opened up with all their heavy weapons. The enemy artillery kept pounding at us. Through our glasses we could see their infantry pouring out of their foxholes to follow up the tanks. Some time in the middle of things, squadrons of swastika planes came over and swooped down on our positions, bombing and machine-gunning. They knocked out two of the doughboy cannon and some of the antitank guns but the rest kept pumping away. Then a flock of our own planes came boiling out of the sky and a mass dogfight started upstairs. And always the tanks kept coming. Rick cut in to tell me the Long Toms—our heavies—were coming in and while we shortened the range some more, our fire became heavier and still we weren't getting enough of the tanks. A plane came streaking down in flames, then another. We kept on reducing the range. The leading tanks were only a thousand yards away, then nine hundred, eight hundred, seven hundred. Another plane crashed, over on the far side of no man's land where the enemy infantry was moving up. We could see them scattering away from the burning plane. We pulled down our range again and our shells were pouring in so thick and fast it didn't seem possible any of the tanks could get through but they did. Rick cut in again to say all the artillery within range was coming in. They did, just as we called for fire on a line only three hundred yards in front of us. This had to do it. We didn't dare drop our shells any closer to our own positions. The concentration was terrific. The whole area in front of us was just one merry, blazing hell while we held our breath. Two tanks came zigzagging through it, then another, then one more—and that was all. Through the smoke, we could see all the rest of them turn tail and head for home. We finally had stopped them.

The four which did get through never had a chance. The pair in front were within two hundred yards of us before they seemed to realize the jig was up. When they tried to turn back it was too late. The doughboys gave them everything they had and the tanks exploded right in our faces. One of the other two wavered and stopped. Its turret hatch opened and the crew piled out and came our way, hands in the air. The fourth tank was broadside on when it was hit by half a dozen projectiles and it just collapsed in a burning heap. Nobody came out of it alive.

So now the fire direction was all in reverse. It was up the range and up it again to catch as many of the tanks

as we could before they reached port. The enemy infantry already was backtracking.

Byrnes came over and flopped beside the foxhole. All he said was, "Phew!" and I was ready to double that. We took out cigarettes and tried to light them and then we both laughed. Our hands were shaking so much we could hardly make it.

As our artillery fire rolled farther and farther from us across no man's land, we could see wrecked and burning tanks all over the place. Almost a third of the armor which had attacked us had been knocked out. The air fight was over, too, with our planes chasing what was left of the swastikas.

But there was no letup for us. Before the last tank was out of sight, the orders came through to go ahead with our original plan and hit the Jerries while they still were groggy from the licking they had just taken. Byrnes hustled over to his company and almost as soon as we had begun firing the charted concentrations, the doughboys were on their way. By the time we had finished those, they were so far ahead we had to pick up and follow them. The terrain was a mess, torn up by shellfire and dotted with wrecked tanks, dead Jerries and some of the planes which had been shot down, and it took us quite a while to catch up with Byrnes.

Then we still kept going. It was a walk-through. Apparently the enemy had abandoned the ridge as soon as they saw the doughboys coming and had pulled back far enough to give themselves a chance to catch their breath and reorganize. They did a good job of it. After we had taken the ridge practically without casualties, we ran into nothing but trouble. We tried to push on because the position we really wanted was still ahead but the Jerries stood their ground and began slugging it out.

ALL THAT DAY AND THE NEXT we just inched ahead, grabbing a rise here and another one there but not actually getting anywhere. We had trouble with communications all the time. During the first afternoon, Furman had to fix the lines seven times under fire. At one time when the wire was out, the radio was damaged by a spent shell splinter and Barney had to do an emergency repair job, also under fire. Warren literally had his binoculars shot out of his hands. A slug which just missed his fingers hit the glasses and broke them into smithereens. Most of the time the going was so thick and spotting targets was so difficult he and I divided the zone of observation with each of us taking over half to be sure of covering it all.

By the end of the second day, Byrnes' company, which had been carrying the load, was worn down to a nubbin and had to be relieved. The company which took over was commanded by a man we didn't know, a Captain Sommers, up front for the first time.

By this time the infantry and artillery weren't throwing rocks at each other any more. In the first battle, the doughboys found out how valuable the artillery can be to them and after that, they were pretty much for us. We still weren't exactly palsy-walsy but the only doughboys who still looked at us out of the corners of their eyes were those who hadn't been through the mill. Sommers was one of these, suspicious of everything the artillery did, especially the FO detail. But he was a good infantryman and smart enough to give us all the co-operation he could. For value received, of course.

We converted him, though. Orders came through for an attack at four o'clock in the morning which we hoped would turn out to be a surprise. For his part of the punch, Sommers needed some especially well-timed and accurate artillery fire. When we gave it to him and made the going easy, he seemed almost as surprised as the Heinies, who thought the whole thing was unfair,

and he began to thaw out. Naturally, the detail had to go along as there was no other way of keeping contact with him in the dark. That surprised him, too, and he thawed out some more. A little later, when the Jerries were awake and fighting back, his company was stopped cold by a heavy machine-gun concentration. Barney set up his radio in a shell hole and we had the battalion dropping shells on the MGs while Sommers was still on his way over to ask us if we could do anything about it. That clinched it.

He looked over where the one-o-five shells were dropping dead on the target, then turned to me, cleared his throat and said, "Nice work." Then we both started to laugh and when I soft-soaped it a little by saying the artillery had to be on its toes for doughboys who could step out like his, we were practically buddies. It wasn't long before I thought he was second only to Byrnes.

By daylight, we were a lot nearer our main objective than we had been the night before but then the Jerries collected themselves and began slugging back again, taking advantage of every possible defense position to hold us off as long as possible. Twice they tried to counter-attack but we managed to get the range on them and the combination of our artillery and the infantry heavy weapons and machine guns stopped them although once the whole detail had to do a fast back scramble to keep out of their way. The best observation post we could get that day was a shell hole. There just wasn't time for digging.

That was the day we awoke to the value of working with the infantry mortar observers. There were more targets than the one-o-fives could handle effectively. A good many of them were the spot kind which is mortar meat. The mortars were handling them, too. The trouble was, we didn't have close enough contact with the mortars to know which targets they would take on.

So we tried working alongside their observers whenever we could and keeping in touch with them all the time so we could decide in advance whether mortars or hows should handle targets about which there was any question. It worked from the start and that made another lesson learned.

Early in the afternoon, it began to cloud up, heavy and dark. By that time, with every outfit edging its way ahead wherever and whenever it could, there wasn't anything resembling a front line. Our leading elements were zig-zagged all over the place. Once, when I was talking to Rick on the telephone, he told me Sommers' company was making faster progress than any other outfit, and it wouldn't be long before the hows would have to move up. By sixteen hundred, we knew we were at the point of a salient, closer to the enemy than we had been at any time. Opposite us here they weren't more than four or five hundred yards away.

The sky was completely overcast now and Sommers wanted to push the Jerries out of their position before it rained. We caught up with him just as his company was starting forward again. We ran into a storm of lead. To go ahead would have been suicide so Sommers ordered his men to take cover and dig in.

It was so murky now that observation wasn't easy but I wanted to spot the machine guns and mortars which had stopped us and I edged over to the left for a better view. Barney and Warren set up the radio in a shell hole and I crawled into another one farther up with the remote control. Before I had any reason to use it, though, Furman came up with the telephone. After he had checked the line, he eased himself into another shell hole. There were a lot of them around there.

A foggy haze was spreading over everything and I was about ready to give up hope of seeing anything when the boys across the way decided to help me by spraying Sommers' position with their machine guns and mortars again. From the tip-off given by the sound of them, I

figured their position as best I could and called the fire direction center but Rick answered the telephone. He said the other batteries were moving up and Battery C was handling the cover fires. I gave him the fire mission and the adjusting round came over just as it began to rain.

X

IN a couple of seconds the rain was coming down in sheets. It was so blinding I couldn't see anything fifty yards away. I told Rick to fire for effect but I couldn't tell from where I was when and if the mission was accomplished so I was going to edge up for a closer look.

I took the remote control with me and worked my way forward about a hundred yards, not worrying about being careful because the enemy couldn't see any better than I could in that cloudburst. I found a shell hole half full of water but I already was soaked and crouching in a little water couldn't make me any damper so I slid into it. I still couldn't see much. The firing was subsiding all along the front. Opposite us, the Jerries had become absolutely quiet but Battery C was pumping shells into their positions.

Then I had the jolt of my life. Straight ahead of me, a half dozen Jerries suddenly loomed out of the rain. Then I made out a lot more of them and it struck me this was no rainstorm patrol but a counterattack. I ducked my head below the edge of the shell hole, so I was practically up to my neck in water, and, in about ten seconds, called Barney and told him to get word to Sommers quick.

Then I scrambled out of the shell hole and started slogging back toward the detail. It didn't seem like a good day to play Horatio at the bridge. I thought I was going to get away with it when I heard that rat-tat-tat and bullets whizzing by me. I ducked behind a rock, pulled out my automatic and emptied it at them. I hit a grand total of one and I think I only winged him. But the Jerries flopped on their faces for a few seconds. . . .

I pushed a spare clip into my gun and headed for home again. I was lucky for a minute because the Jerries didn't know it was just the Lone Ranger out there and they were still down. I gained another ten or fifteen yards before they came to. Just as I dodged behind another rock, a couple of them yelled, "*Offizier!*" and why not? I had the tag on me—a pistol belt and no weapon but an automatic. They let fly but I was behind a good-sized boulder and kept on being lucky. Peeking around the rock, I saw them start a rush for me and I emptied my lovely automatic once more. My average held. I winged another one and the rest slowed up just long enough for me to slip away from the rock and roll part way down hill out of sight. Then I crawled up to the shell hole where I had left Barney with the radio set.

I tumbled into it and had another shock when I saw Barney was firing his carbine toward the left at some Heinies who had no business coming from that direction at all. Warren was in another shell hole about ten feet away, firing at the gang which had surprised me. Then Furman, who had taken the message to Sommers, flopped into our shell hole, yanked his carbine off his shoulders and started to fire back in the direction of our battery position. I thought he was crazy until I made out some dim figures crawling up from his side. We were practically surrounded.

While I was reloading my clips, Furman said Captain Sommers wanted us to get to him. I said it was a little late for that, because as soon as we stopped firing and tried to get away, the Heinies would rush us and grab us before we were halfway to the company.

Barney looked at me over his shoulder and grinned. "So we play Custer," he said.

He wasn't far wrong. The Heinies started a rush at us from three sides. The reason they had us from three

"Forward Observer," by Edwin V. Westrate 65

directions, of course, was because of the raggedness of the front, which made it easy for any fairly small group to sneak behind the lines of the opposition, particularly us, as we were well ahead of the troops on our left. In that downpour it was especially simple to slip through any gap in the front.

Just as the Heinies started for our shell hole, we heard Sommers' doughboys start shooting their rifles and machine guns and there were louder bursts which sounded like grenades and that meant action at close quarters. It also meant we four were distinctly on our own.

We didn't have time to think about that, though. About all that flashed through our minds was that this was it for everybody in the detail. The doughboys were more than seventy-five yards away and it was a certainty some of the enemy would move into that gap so we would be entirely surrounded. The only thing in our favor was the rain which was coming down heavier than ever so the Heinies couldn't see how few of us there were.

When they came at us, the advantage was with us for a couple of seconds because we knew exactly where they were and three carbines in good hands can do a lot of damage while my automatic at least made noise. This was the first time we had been at close grips with the enemy and the first time the fellows ever had had occasion to use their carbines but they went at it like veterans. They weren't just shooting off their guns. They were hitting live targets, firing carefully and deliberately but fast enough so it must have seemed as if a dozen rifles were in that shell hole. Anyway, enough of the Heinies dropped so that the rest stopped and pulled back.

While they were hesitating, Warren crawled over to us and said, "There's another shell hole—a big one—about ten yards over. I think we can make it. They'll start pouring it in here in a minute and we might as well let them shoot where we ain't." Barney didn't want to go. He almost bawled when he said, "How about my radio?" Warren said, "Papa will buy you a new one if you're a good boy."

We learned how smart Jack was in a very few moments. We had crawled about two-thirds of the way to the other shell hole when the Jerries came out of the blinding rain in another three-way rush, firing everything they had at the radio hole. It gave us time to fall into the new shell hole and square away to start shooting again. I don't know if I hit anybody with my automatic but not many of the carbine shots were wasted. We didn't expect to get away but we were making it very expensive for the other side.

ODD THINGS STAY in your memory of situations like that. What I remember most clearly was Barney's private war. He was on the side facing the shell hole we had left and he was firing away, muttering under his breath, "Keep away from that radio, you stinking so-and-so" and then he'd send another bullet at some Jerry who was just reaching the radio.

Then the expected happened. Some of the enemy started coming at us from the doughboy side and now we had to fire in four directions. Of course, by now, the others knew we had moved and turned their guns on us. Then Furman yelled, "Damn!" and began trying to fire his carbine with just his right hand. His left shoulder was bleeding. I slipped a new clip into my automatic and handed it to him while I took his carbine away. His face was drawn and his teeth were clenched tight from the pain but he kept on firing.

It probably was because we were making it so hot for them that the Heinies didn't move in and mop us up. We had hit at least a dozen of them and they were staying back far enough so their aim wasn't so good. Besides, it seemed to have struck them they would knock

off their pals across the way if they fired too high since we were surrounded, so they were firing low and most of their lead hit the mud around the edge of the shell hole.

Still there didn't seem to be any hope. They were inching toward us and our ammunition was running low. Then it seemed to dawn upon all of us at once that the fire of the doughboys was coming nearer. At first, we thought it was a trick of our ears. Then we saw the spurts of flame from their rifles and machine guns. Some of the Jerries we knew we hadn't hit suddenly rolled over and lost interest in the fight.

Then next thing we knew, a couple of squads of doughboys had fought their way through the enemy on that side and then had reached us and were cutting loose on the rest. After that, it didn't last long. The Jerries decided the surprise party was over and faded back through the rain as fast as they could scramble.

Barney was the first man out of the shell hole. For once, he forgot to be careful and ran all the way to his radio. I started to crawl out, too, and wondered why my left leg felt so stiff and numb and then Warren yelled, "Hold it, lieutenant," and pointed at my leg which was oozing blood. Then I saw that Furman had slumped down in a dead faint and I told Warren to take care of him.

One of the doughboys jumped down into the hole, ripped away my pants' leg and, for the first time, I realized a Jerry bullet had torn a gash in the fleshy part of my thigh. The doughboy made a tourniquet and stopped the bleeding, then bandaged me as best he could in that downpour. Warren said it looked as if Furman's collarbone had been broken by the bullet which hit him, and he had kept on firing and hadn't passed out until the fight was over.

Sommers came over to say we had saved his bacon as an attack in the rain was the last thing he had expected and the warning had just given him time to get set. He was a little grim about the situation, though. He said there still were a lot of the enemy behind us and we were in a pocket but he expected to hold out until help came. He had been able to contact Major Barlow and a pretty respectable force was on its way. That meant, of course, that the wounded, including Furman and myself, couldn't get back until the reinforcements reached us.

ABOUT THAT TIME, Barney came over, carrying the remote control which he had dragged in from where I had dropped it. He was beaming. "The set got a little shot up," he said, "but I've got it working." When he scrambled back to the radio, I called Rick and explained the situation. He said he would send up Dolan to relieve me but Warren and Barney would have to handle the telephone for a couple of days until he could get another wire man.

It was just a few minutes after that that we heard a lot of firing behind us. It kept getting heavier and nearer to us, so we knew it was our reinforcements clashing with the Jerries who had cut us off. Then the firing moved over to the left, began to sputter out, then died altogether and then our doughboys began streaming up with the word that the enemy was on the run. Dolan came up with them and another man to guide us back to the new battery position.

The rain never let up for a minute. I found I could hobble around a little but it was going to be too easy to slip on that mud in the dark so both Furman and I went back on stretchers. He went on to the base hospital, of course, but I stopped at the field dressing station. After giving me the works, the doctor said I would not have to be evacuated if I didn't try any walking for a few days. He sent me to bed and I guess I slept for about fourteen

hours. When I awoke, it was still raining and I just stayed where I was. A couple of days later I could walk well enough to go back to the battery. . . .

XII

THE day it happened started out as one of the quietest we had had on our sector. There was a good deal of firing off in the distance somewhere to our right but nothing was happening where we were. Then, without any warning, the Jerry artillery opened up on us with everything they had.

Our observation post was on a narrow ridge which jutted out into no man's land for quite a distance. Sommers' company was in position about two hundred yards back and three hundred to the right of us. A good many shells were dropping over there. Some of them burst near us but these seemed to be strays.

Through our binoculars, we could see a lot of movement across the way that had the earmarks of attack. When I called Rick to tell him trouble seemed to be coming, he said the gun crews were set for action as soon as we gave them some targets to work on. He said a lot of enemy shells were going over the battery positions but they hadn't hit much of anything yet.

The Jerry artillery fire seemed to increase with every minute and now, unmistakably, we could see their infantry coming out of their positions and edging into no man's land. Then Warren crawled over and pointed to the left, saying he had spotted tanks coming out of the Jerry lines over there. When I tried to call in the information, the line had gone dead. Wills went out on it and I used the remote control to give the FDC the news.

I couldn't get a good look at the tanks from where we were, so I scrambled ahead along the slope of the ridge until I was near the end of the remote control cable. Then I climbed up until I reached a good spot in a cluster of fair-sized rocks on something of a peak.

My first look from there didn't cheer me up. Tanks were breaking out from the enemy positions all the way across the sector, swinging out in front of the mass of infantry which was moving in right behind them. When I called the FDC and told them the worst, the S-3 said every forward observer and liaison officer on the front was calling for all available artillery and it was all going into action.

I reported the spread, range and pace of the tanks in our zone and the one-o-fives and mediums began pitching shells but even when the Long Toms joined in, it didn't add up to nearly enough fire power for this job. It just exposed our weakness.

Our fire was hitting among the tanks and we were wrecking a few of them but the rest came zigzagging along as if they knew we didn't have enough stuff to stop them. And that tidal wave of infantry behind them was growing bigger every minute as more and more of them came out of the Jerry positions, a lot more than we had on our side in this sector.

Barney cut in to tell me Wills had been back but before he could extend the line my way, it had gone out again and he was away on that repair job now. So I stayed with the remote control.

The doughboys rushed up with their antitank weapons and began to let fly with all they had, doing a good deal of damage but it still wasn't enough and the tanks kept rolling our way.

When they reached our ridge, they simply divided and cut past it on both sides, their guns going full blast. I could see what was left of the antitank outfits pulling back.

The Jerry infantry was coming within range now and Sommers' men began pumping away with their rifles and machine guns. Then the infantry was across no man's

land, too, and one swarm of them headed for Sommers' position while another struck at our left company. The fighting around Sommers became heavier and heavier but I was so busy with the artillery fire on the tanks I couldn't watch what was happening back there.

I don't know how long it was before there seemed to be something queer about the firing around Sommers. When I looked back, I could see the reason. The company had fallen back at least three hundred yards. Then I saw Wills heading toward me with the telephone wire. The next second a shell burst almost directly in front of him. When the smoke cleared, he wasn't moving any more. He just lay crumpled on the ground.

I saw Warren crawl out to him and turn him over. He looked up toward me and shook his head. He made no move to help Wills, just took the chest reel from his shoulders and fumbled in his pocket for the splicing tools. Watching him, I felt rather hollow. I knew the detail had had its first fatality.

Warren clamped the telephone instrument to the wire for a quick test, then came crawling toward me as fast as he could, unreeling wire as he came. He flopped among the rocks beside me, out of breath but he connected the instrument for the test and handed the phone to me. He just said, "Don is gone, sir," but there was a lot of misery in his eyes. Then Barney called on the remote control and asked for Warren. I called through the FDC on the telephone and while I was talking, Jack spoke to Barney for a few seconds, then dropped the remote control and hustled away.

By this time a good many of the tanks had passed us and when I looked back, the enemy infantry was closing in on Sommers. I told the FDC but the doughboys had to be on their own. Even with all the artillery we had working on the tanks, we weren't stopping them.

Then I saw Jack and Barney crawling up with the radio. We were practically surrounded already with the Jerry infantry behind us and their tanks on both sides of the ridge.

A shell burst almost in my ears but I was on my face and didn't get a scratch. When I looked up, I saw the hole, a big one, less than twenty feet away. The concussion had me dopey for a while and the next thing I knew, Johns and Warren had tumbled into the new shell hole. Barney looked my way grinning and yelled, "They dug this one just for us."

Maybe we should have gone back when the doughboys pulled out of their forward position but this was a perfect spot for directing fire on the tanks and the conformation of the ground was such that nobody could see us unless they stumbled our way which was unlikely. Our perch was practically an island and the Jerries had every reason to think there wasn't an American left around there. Now that we had the radio set with us, there wasn't a thing to indicate our presence except the telephone wire which wasn't very visible and even if a Jerry tripped over it, he'd probably feel sure it wasn't in use.

Just how much good all this was going to do us was doubtful because by that time, we couldn't have gone back if we'd wanted to. The Jerry tanks were past us on both sides of the ridge and the Jerry infantry was behind us. We heard the sounds of a terrific battle going on back there and knew it was Sommers' men fighting for their lives against overwhelming numbers.

The tanks weren't escaping damage. We were knocking some of them out but there were too many of them. Then Rick cut in to say, "Haven't you moved?"

I told him we hadn't had time. He said we must be back of the enemy and I said we were and the view was wonderful. Then he asked if we could get through and when I told him not unless they pushed the tanks back, he yelled, "For God's sake, how did you let that happen?"

"So you *could* push them back," I said, "business hasn't been very good so far."

"It will be," he said, "or *we're* going to move—in a heluva hurry."

"Then stop 'em," I said, "we don't think we'd like Jerry chow."

"Okay," he said, "here come the works."

He wasn't fooling. The fire on the tanks became heavier. The roar was tremendous and, up in our crow's nest, we held our breath. And now, for the first time, the tanks seemed to be having trouble.

Then it dawned upon us that the infantry fighting seemed to have stopped and next we saw something which made us sick. All that was left of Sommers' company was marching up, disarmed, between enemy guards. We could see Sommers at the head of them, a bandage around his head and his left arm bloody. That whole company knew where we were and finally passed not more than fifty yards away but not one of them so much as turned his head or batted an eye in our direction. We burrowed deeper in our holes and prayed for luck. We had it. Not a Jerry headed our way.

When they were past and we could look up again, we let out a yell. The whole fleet of enemy tanks had turned around and was streaking back. I told Rick what was happening and told him to keep on upping the range. Then we had to burrow again because all the Jerry infantry seemed to be headed for home again, too, but our luck held and we weren't spotted.

The tide had turned so quickly we were puzzled. We kept saying there was something wrong with this picture. Our artillery fire had not been heavy enough to cause this headlong retreat. Then we saw what we thought was the real cause—our own tanks, a lot of them, rolling fast.

We had just upped the range again when a burst of enemy shell fire dropped on our hill. Maybe it was just for luck or to make sure no damaging observation was coming from the peak but it killed the telephone and, since the way back seemed open again, Warren went out on the repair job.

DOWN BELOW US everything looked good. The enemy tanks were back at their own positions but kept right on going as far as we could see. Though the binoculars, the leading elements of the enemy infantry seemed to be fading back with them, while our own tanks kept speeding up. It was entirely too good to be true and that something which had been buzzing in the back of my mind before started again but it didn't crystallize into anything except worry.

Through my glasses, I tried to look behind the forward enemy positions, for some clue as to what all the funny business was about. I thought I saw something but the angle wasn't good and I wasn't sure. Two or three hundred yards ahead of us was another point we couldn't reach before, which I thought might offer a better view. I took the remote control and started for it, yelling at Barney that I was going. I had the sudden feeling that it was urgent and ducked ahead in a sort of crawling run. Looking back, I saw Barney coming after me on the gallop. I didn't know what it meant but I needed him on the set and I stopped to signal him to go back. He told me later he thought I had called to him to go with me. That misunderstanding saved his life.

He understood my signal and started back. Before I went ahead again, I took another look through the binoculars and found I had a view through a gap in the hills. The few Jerries I could see looked suspiciously as if they were at gun positions. And, all of a sudden I got it. We had heard that Rommel had sent some of his troops up here to help guard his retreat to the north. This whole blitz today had been in the technique of Rommel, not Von Arnim. The thing I had been trying to remember

was how Rommel had used exactly the same tactics against the British in Libya long before, attacked, then retreated until he had sucked in the British tanks within point-blank range of his eighty-eights and then had blown them to hell. He was trying the same trick again and we were falling for it, hook, line and sinker.

I raised the remote control phone to call Rick and give the warning just as an enemy salvo banged down on the perch where we had been. Barney hadn't reached it yet which was what saved him. He was down on his face and, for a moment, I thought he had been hit but he got up on his hands and knees and scrambled for his radio shell hole. He flopped into it and I tried again to call through but nothing happened. Then Barney showed his head and shoulders and made a signal which told the worst. The radio was out.

I thought I was going out of my mind while I scrambled back. Our tanks were rolling hell bent straight into the mouths of those waiting guns and with our telephone out, the radio was the only way to send through a warning that might have a chance to stop them. Barney was almost crying when I reached him. One of the Jerry shells had smashed his set to bits.

For the first time since we had been in combat, we were without direct communications to the battery or anyone else back there. I never felt so hopelessly helpless and did the only thing I could think of. I told Barney to hustle back to where he could wigwag a message. If Warren were back there, he would relay it or somebody else would. We had no flags with us, so Barney ripped his handkerchief in two and tied the pieces to a couple of splinters of his broken radio cases which would serve as sticks. Then he went back on the double.

I made a couple of flags for myself the same way, then climbed on top of a boulder and started wigwagging toward our tanks passing below, hoping somebody in one of them would see me. I kept repeating the same signals over and over. "Stop. Trap ahead. Stop. Trap ahead." But it was no use. Even if they saw they probably thought it was a Jerry pulling a fast one.

I still was trying when our tanks walked into it. It was murder. They rolled right into the muzzles of the concealed eighty-eights and all I could do was stand by and watch tank after tank blown to bits or burst into flames or just stop, wrecked. Those in the rear tried to turn back but the eighty-eights seemed to be everywhere. I don't know how many tanks we lost altogether that day but it was a sickening few which escaped in our zone.

We didn't have to wonder what would happen after that and it came quickly. Rommel's tanks boiled out of the hills again and this time they looked like a tidal wave while with them came everything and everybody else the Jerries had, straight over the terrain they had crossed before but with a lot less to worry about this time.

There was nothing left for me to do where I was and I knew I'd have to step on it to get back at all. I found Warren and Johns just beyond where Sommers' company had been captured. Barney was badly wounded and Warren was trying to hold him up and take him to the rear. He had been hit by a shell fragment just after he had wigwagged his message to Jack who had relayed it and then gone to help Barney. The message went through too late to do any good, of course, but, at least, we had tried.

Barney was practically out and we had a difficult time moving him. The whole terrain was hashed up, torn up by shell-fire with more coming over all the time. Battle debris was littered everywhere—rifles, helmets, wrecked machine guns, not to mention the bodies of both Americans and Jerries. There was some confusion among the doughboys we ran into. They had arrived too late to help Sommers' company, had tried to establish a new po-

sition and now had been ordered back again. We did manage to find a couple of litter bearers who started Barney on his way to the hospital. Then Warren and I headed for the spot where our jeep had been parked. All we found was the wreck of it. It looked as if somebody had tossed a couple of hand grenades into it, maybe one of our own doughboys, to keep it from being captured. There wasn't anything worth salvaging.

We hurried on back to the battery position but the battery wasn't there any more. The whole battalion had pulled out—and just in time. Rommel's forces were pouring ahead like a flood and smashing straight through our lines. We didn't have much time to get away ourselves and we might not have made it if a reconnaissance car hadn't come along and picked us up.

When we finally reached the battery which had taken up a new position away back, Rick looked at us as if he didn't believe it. He said, "My God, out of the grave again. How many rabbits' feet do you carry?" But we didn't have time to talk. The battery was firing as fast as it could pump out the shells. Rick told us that, while Sommers' company was the only outfit lost in our zone, a lot of the left battalion had been captured, including the FO and two members of the Battery B detail and our liaison officer. For fire direction, the battalion was depending almost entirely on messages which came through from retreating doughboys who had escaped the first rush.

That meant Warren and I had to go back to work. We commandeered one of the battery's other radio sets and started forward again. We didn't have to wonder where to go to find targets. It was just straight ahead. We could hear the Jerries with no trouble and they were more than willing to meet us halfway.

XIII

I HOPE we never have to go through another nightmare like one that started that day. Rommel made us look pretty bad. Not only had we fallen for a trick which already had been blueprinted for us but all the other things which were wrong with us began to show up in a hurry, particularly the results of our lack of discipline and co-ordination.

The carelessness about security was particularly costly. I hate to think about what happened to some of those boys who found it too much trouble to dig a foxhole and had nothing but slit trenches to fall into when Rommel's tanks came rolling through. Those tank drivers loved slit trenches with Americans in them. They would run their treads right into the trench, then half turn—like a meat grinder. No, it isn't pretty to think about but it happened to too many of our men. It couldn't have happened if they had been in foxholes. And there just wasn't the co-ordination between the artillery and infantry and air forces we should have had and which could have done a lot to prevent or stop what was happening now.

When Jack and I started back that day, we were about as depressed as we thought possible then. We were getting the pants licked off us, we had had our first man killed and Barney was badly wounded, with Furman already in the hospital. Besides that, we were moving forward against a tide of retreating doughboys, so it seemed we were heading straight into worse trouble than we had had before, except that Rick had given us strict orders to avoid capture. In case it looked as if they were closing in on us, we were to duck.

Handling an army on the attack is a stiff enough job but it's a picnic compared with a retreat. There were no white feathers in that army of ours but there was a hellish lot of confusion. Actually, I guess we handled ourselves better than we had any right to. In all the mix-up, there was no panic. For the most part, the men were sore as

goats, which is a good sign for an army being kicked in the teeth. They just wanted to get set for the chance to slug back.

This wasn't easy, just then, not under the speed with which Rommel struck and kept striking. We lost a good many men and a lot of equipment so that it constantly seemed more difficult to make a stand which would be effective.

On that first jump back to the forward zone, Warren and I didn't have far to go before things became thick. In fact, we weren't up more than a mile and a half before we saw the tanks rolling our way. When we had the radio planted in something like a defile, the first message to Rick was a warning that the battalion had better prepare to move back again. But Rick said, "Not yet," and our fire missions were accepted. The artillery was plenty willing. It knocked out some more of the tanks but our fire power wasn't enough to do more than make the rest a little more cautious but they kept on coming.

We had to pull back half a mile, then another half mile and then we were almost at Rick's OP, moving back with a thin line of doughboys, retreating but still pitching everything they had. It was growing dark, now, which helped. It gave the battalion a chance to pull up stakes again and the doughboys to try to establish some kind of defense positions. But we didn't have enough men or stuff available to do more than slow Rommel down. Until we had plenty more, it didn't look good.

It wasn't good. Rick told me the battalion was going back eight thousand yards with nobody expecting the new positions to be the last stopping place in that direction. There was no sleep for us. All night long, the Jerry infantry and artillery kept punching away at us to prevent us from getting squared away to meet the renewal of the main attack in the morning. By daylight, we had staggered back another half mile and our hows weren't much more than seven thousand yards back.

The one break we had was the arrival of Byrnes and his company up where we were. Somehow, things always seemed to improve with Byrnes around. This night, when we certainly needed any sort of lift, was no exception. He slapped back one Nazi punch without our help and then smelled out another, bigger one and gave us such accurate information that when we called in the fire missions, our hows were on the targets so fast they smashed the enemy formations before they were within hailing distance of our lines.

After that, we weren't bothered for a couple of hours and Byrnes and I had a reunion. He had been out with a minor wound and we hadn't seen each other for a couple of weeks. We spent most of our time talking about ways and means to improve methods of operation between forward observers and the infantry. We both agreed neither the infantry nor the artillery had the right system yet for making the best use of FOs, especially so far as continual contact between the FO and the leading elements was concerned. We evolved several ideas for strengthening the setup but it was just wishful conversation that night. We knew we had bigger worries right in our laps than changes in the FO routine.

It seems now as if the chat we had that night was the last time I stopped moving during the whole sickening retreat we had just begun. Byrnes kept on doing brilliant work, making the Jerries pay for every foot they pushed ahead, though you could hardly figure in terms of feet when Rommel was pounding forward six and seven miles a day. But Byrnes had only one company and his good work was just a drop in the bucket. The company suffered a lot of casualties. After two days of retreat, retreat, retreat, it was down to a handful and had to be relieved.

There seemed to be no end to it. The Jerries kept coming—fast—and they wrecked our center. They sliced through and were pushing us back and back until it

"Forward Observer," by Edwin V. Westrate 69

looked as though we would be shoved all the way out of Tunisia and back into Algeria.

It was discouraging and humiliating but, more than that, it was fantastic. At that time, Rommel was supposed to be a beaten dog. Instead, here he was slapping us around like schoolboys and moving so fast we couldn't get set anywhere to block him.

DURING THE FIRST NIGHT, Rick sent us a new telephone man, Phil Renburg, who introduced himself by handing me the telephone in the dark and telling me the line had been checked and was okay. Next day, Rick sent us Dan Drake, to replace Barney. Both were good men in their own lines though they had had no training in forward observer work. They had to work into it on the run as there was no time to teach anybody anything. They were willing and that was all we could ask just then.

Renburg hadn't been with us an hour before Rommel's force started driving again. From that minute, we didn't know what it meant to rest or sleep. None of us ever had worked so hard in our lives or under such terrific pressure. We couldn't let up at all. The enemy kept slugging and then slugging some more. Our forward observing consisted chiefly of reporting their pace and progress and the forces Rommel was throwing into the fight. We directed plenty of fire missions but the amount of artillery we had couldn't do more than slow down the attack a little. The battalion had to be ready to pack up and move back again any minute.

All of us were becoming exhausted. Personally, I was climbing up and down hills and crawling through gullies or scrambling across half-open country from morning till night and from night till morning. My eyes became bleary and bloodshot. My legs were like shafts of lead and they were so wobbly sometimes I thought they would cave under me.

Dolan was wounded the second day of the retreat. That meant there was no chance of relief because, God knows, Rick had his hands full. As it was, he came up a couple of times for an hour or so and I took his place at the battery OP but I was so much on edge it was worse than being on the job up ahead. I practically had to force Warren, Drake and Renburg to snatch naps when they could and Warren spelled me for the few hours of sleep I did get. We all had forgotten what a warm meal was like.

Every man on the front was worn to a frazzle. Rommel had moved so fast and given us such a mauling we were in worse shape than even he knew. He had us where he could lash out to the north, south or west. The night we seemed to be having a breather, we knew in the back of our minds it was just an interlude before the worst blow sent our way yet, that it only meant Rommel was bringing up more stuff, and that it was up to us to make the most desperate stand we could with what we had left.

I didn't dare go to sleep. The very quiet made me suspicious. Once, a strong enemy patrol came over, so big we first thought it was an attack. There were enough of them to drive the doughboy outposts back and we had a merry little fight with them before we drove them off. I say "we" because the FO detail was in it and we had a chance to use our carbines for a few rounds. I was still carrying Furman's carbine. I hadn't packed my automatic since the day he had been wounded. After that we moved because there was no use staying in a spot the Jerries had located. From our new position, Warren and I went out after things became a little too quiet again. We ran into another patrol and had to move fast to avoid being captured.

Things went that way all night and, as soon as morning came, the pressure was on again and we stumbled back a little farther. But the blow wasn't as hard as we had ex-

pected and we had the chance to steady down. Then the firing became heavier off to our left and far ahead of us and the word came through that the Jerries were brushing past us for bigger game ahead. We tried to crowd back but we could not budge an inch beyond the line where Rommel apparently had decided to hold us while he went on his way.

Byrnes came back into the fight with about half the replacements he needed and kept trying to feel out the enemy, looking for a spot to land a blow which might help the fellows who were in that uproar beyond us. We were doing the same thing, dragging all over the zone, looking for something, anything we could transform into a break because the Jerries certainly weren't giving us any of their own free will.

Warren and I went out on a limb again and once more came within an eyelash of being captured. We managed to get away but it just about finished me. It was all the fast motion—or motion of any kind—I had left in me. I was dizzy from weariness. But you can always do what you have to do and I kept going for just that reason—I had to.

All along our sector, the doughboys were fighting and the artillery was firing almost continuously but we couldn't dent the Nazi line. I wondered how things were going off to our left where the real battle was going on, wondered in a dull sort of way because I didn't seem able to think about anything much except what was directly in front of me.

It was about fourteen hundred when I saw Rick coming up and wondered how he could move so fast and what he was doing up here. Then there was a mission to handle and I was adjusting fire when he scrambled up beside me.

"I'll take over," he said. "Go back and get some rest. I've been having it soft at the OP. Handle it for a while."

I said, "Not a chance. I'm all right."

"You're out on your feet," he said. "Go on back. That's an order."

Just then Jerry machine guns began blazing away in our direction and shells began plunking around us, so all we could do was hug the ground, the racket so loud and continuous we couldn't even talk. When it subsided a little, I tried to argue with Rick but he gave me a shove to start me on my way. "Go on back," he said again. He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me. "Here's a letter from Betty which just came for you," he said. "I have one, too. We'll compare notes later. We're going away from here. We'll call you as soon as we're located."

I put the letter into my own pocket. For some reason, Rick put out his hand and I shook it. Then he grinned at me. "Have a nice vacation—for two hours," he said.

"I'll send you a postcard," I said. I didn't know how dopey I was until I was on my way. I was crawling back to the battery in my sleep. It was a good three thousand yards back from the observation point and all I remember is leaving the detail and then tumbling into Rick's foxhole at the battery OP.

An officer I hadn't met before was on duty. He said his name was Venner and he had come up the night before to replace Dolan. He was supposed to go back to duty as assistant exec when I came along but he didn't because I just passed out for a while. Not for long, though. It was only a little after fifteen hundred when I awoke and heard the telephone man making a check with Renburg so it went through my mind hazily that our line must have gone out and been repaired while I was dozing. I shook myself out of the fog and told Venner it was okay for him to leave now. When he was gone, it was compulsory for me to stay awake. I needed a pretty strong reason. Then a call came from Rick.

"New spot," he said. "Take it. Jig-Mike 76. Base point dead ahead. Six hundred."

It took a few seconds for that to percolate. Then I yelled, "Hey, what are you doing away up there?"

"Gangway, fire mission," he came back, cool as ice. "Base point two hundred left, four hundred short. Troop concentration. Will adjust."

From the FDC came the word, "Accepted" and then, "On the way."

"On target. Fire for effect," Rick said, "I must be getting good," and he laughed.

After that, nothing happened for a while and I settled down to luxury. All I had to do here was stand in the foxhole, lean on my elbows and watch the terrain ahead without moving. It was a little tough staying awake but I made it. Then Rick called again.

"I've moved," he said and chuckled. "Ran the wire myself while Renburg was fixing another break. Base point is one hundred right, four hundred over."

That really jolted me. He was practically in Rommel's lap.

"Rick," I called, "for the love of God—"

"View wonderful," he said. "Think I see something. Stand by."

I didn't know what to say. This had me jittery. Rick wasn't foolhardy. He was one of the most sensible persons I ever knew but in his new location, I didn't see how he could throw a rock in any direction without stirring up the Jerries. I couldn't even understand how he managed to reach it without being killed or captured. He wouldn't have taken that kind of chance without the most urgent reason, one so serious a great deal depended upon it.

THEN, WITHOUT WARNING, the enemy artillery opened up—on the forward zone, the doughboy reserve area, our howitzer positions, and the mediums behind us. It was the heaviest fire we had had since the day of the breakthrough. The telephone man at the OP suddenly said, "FDC line out, sir," and jumped out on it. And then came Rick's voice.

"Fire mission," he said but I interrupted him.

"FDC line out," I said, "use radio."

"Can't," he said, "remote control out. Can't get to set. Relay it by radio—and fast." His voice was perfectly cool as he went on. "All artillery. Base point one hundred right, four hundred over. Many tanks. Hurry."

"Right," I said. I grabbed the radio—and then it hit me. "Rick!" I yelled. "That's your position. Give me right data."

"I did," he said. "Base point one hundred right, four hundred over. Hurry."

I felt as if I had turned to ice. "Rick," I shouted, "get out of there. I won't send in that mission until you're out."

"I have to stay," he said. "Only way to stop 'em. I smelled it. That's why I'm here. Send it in. That's an order. Hurry."

"I can't, Rick," I said. "I can't. Not to you."

"Fire mission," he said. "Send it. This is our one chance. For God's sake, don't spoil it. Make it worth while. Hurry."

"Rick!" I yelled again. "Rick, in the name of God—"

"Fire mission," he said. "Train on me. Hurry."

There are some things you have to do in war. I picked up the radio and called the FDC. "All artillery. Base point one hundred right, four hundred over. Tanks. Hurry."

"One hundred right, four hundred over," I heard the S-3 say. "Accepted. Stand by." I heard him repeat the directions and call for all the artillery. Then he gave some sort of exclamation and the next second he was saying to me, "Good God, you must be wrong. That's Captain Hallon's position."

I said, "Yes, sir. Data correct. Captain Hallon's order. This is Kennard. Hallon radio out. Am relaying."

For a moment, he was silent, then his voice came over, as dead as my own, "On the way."

The radio man at the OP was standing in his foxhole, looking at me, as rigid as if he'd been made of stone. He had heard what was going on, even in that hellish din. Finally he said, "Better get down, lieutenant," and, for the first time, I realized I had climbed out of my own foxhole and was standing up, staring at the terrain ahead. I dropped on my knees. God knows, if ever I wanted to pray, it was then.

It was hot that day, damned hot, but I was shivering when I slid back into the foxhole with the telephone glued to my ears. I stood there shaking through the seconds until the sound of the bursts came—at least, I thought they were our bursts—and with them came Rick's voice.

"Short one hundred," he said, his voice as calm as ever. "Fire for effect. Keep it there. Make it thick and they won't get through."

Into the radio I mumbled. "Short one hundred. Fire for effect." Another fifteen seconds and all twelve howls of the battalion roared.

Rick's voice came again, "On. Keep there."

The mediums and the heavies came in and more one-ovives from the right and left and then it was Rick's voice once more, "So long, Jim. It's been swell."

I'm not ashamed that I was crying when I said, "So long, Rick," but he never heard me. The line was dead.

I just stood there, stunned, while our heavies joined in. Rick had asked for "all artillery." We were giving him all we had. I don't know how long it lasted. It seemed forever. I felt dizzy. I wanted to yell for the guns to stop. But in a war you just do what you have to and whatever hits your chin, you take.

The radio man called me. I picked up the remote control phone. It was Warren. His voice was shaky. "Mission accomplished," he said. "Tanks stopped. Many smashed. Others falling back. Captain Hallon—I'm afraid, sir."

I guess I went a little crazy. I called Venner and I must have sounded hysterical. "Come up here," I yelled. "I've just killed Captain Hallon. I'm going up."

As soon as I saw him coming, I waved at the OP and I was on my way. I didn't even bother to duck. I just ran and scrambled my way up there. It wasn't until I saw the wrecks of some of the tanks and spotted Warren, Drake and Renburg crouched close together among them that I realized I would endanger their lives if I kept on exposing myself, so I flopped and crawled up the rest of the way.

They had found Rick. He probably had been killed the moment he said good-by. He couldn't have escaped. Our fire had torn up every inch of the terrain. And when I reached there and looked down at him, all I could think was that this was my handiwork.

I don't remember much of what happened the rest of that day. We were in an exposed position and the first thing we did was take Rick's body back as far as our doughboy positions. I couldn't even go back any farther with it. I had to work and keep on working.

It didn't take long to learn Rick had done more than stop a tank attack. He had saved us all from being trapped. That was why Rommel had driven past us in the morning and then turned to the left. The attack on us was to have cut through as the other prong of the pincers to lock us in a pocket. Rick must have sensed what was coming and he had taken the only possible way to stop the drive—smash it before it was well under way—by fire direction from a spot where he couldn't miss.

Rommel tried again, of course, almost immediately, but we were set for him this time and he had to give up on our zone but the fighting kept up there, hard, desperate

"Forward Observer," by Edwin V. Westrate 71

fighting, while the Jerries rolled ahead beyond us on the left.

Somewhere along the line, I had a few minutes' breath-er and reached into my pocket for a cigarette. I came up with Betty's letter which I hadn't opened. I read it then. She had written it just a couple of days before, immediately after Rommel's break-through and there was worry in every line of it but one passage was like a slap in the face.

"So much of the safety of the battery depends upon your work," she wrote, "and that means Rick's safety, too. Take good care of him, Jim. But I know you will." It was the same as if she had written, "Take care of him for me." There hadn't been much doubt in my mind before. Now there was none. I had lost both of them in one day. I would have to write to her and what could I say? "Take good care of him." I had taken care of him, all right. I had killed him.

I went back to work. The war was still going on, even if a lot of things had stopped for me, personally. All I had left was the war. . . .

XIV

BARRETT sent up another instrument corporal, Charley Dale, who was a good man but he wasn't Warren. We all missed Jack like the devil, I especially. Of all the original gang, only Barney and I were left, including the relief officers. Rick and Furman had been killed and Dolan and now Jack were in the hospital. The only sentiment we had left about the war was double-barreled hate.

Well, the last week in April, we crashed through the key hills where the Jerries had made their first strong stand and headed for the next one. It was about then that Gorning broke out with the measles. For a couple of days afterward, we all were worried and kept looking ourselves over for those red spots but, as usual, Gorning had done a solo job.

Then we pushed ahead to the last strong enemy line of defense of which Hill 509 was the key and the fighting stepped up to the hottest pitch yet. The Jerries were battling desperately because they knew if we broke through here, it was downhill all the way from Mateur to Bizerte and that meant curtains for them.

Bad luck hit the detail again when Dale was wounded so badly we knew he couldn't live. He was taken back but he died before they could get him on a hospital plane. The rest of the battery had suffered casualties, too, and Barrett told us he was so shorthanded he wouldn't be able to send us another corporal for a few days.

On our end of the line, the going was as tough as it was at the Hill. More men and guns came up but still we only seemed to inch ahead. Boyden, the telephone man who had replaced Gorning, was wounded and we couldn't get a new man for his spot either. So it was just Barney and myself up there. He kept the telephone line open while I handled the radio though, naturally, he had to be on the set when I was using the remote control. Then came the word that the big effort to break through was coming the next day.

We had one of the most advanced observation posts we ever had used and, from our foxholes, it looked as if the attack would be a tough and costly business in our zone unless we could smash practically every Jerry position with artillery before the doughboys had to tackle it. The trouble was, the Jerries were so good at concealment, it was tough locating the positions and we couldn't spot them all even from where we were.

I don't know when it struck me there was a way to spot them with certainty. A man behind the Jerry lines could

do it and the way the front was, I felt sure one man could sneak through and find a hide-out from which he could radio fire missions long enough to do the necessary damage. A month or two before, I would have thought such a stunt was insane if I had thought of it at all but this was a month or two later in the pattern. Now, I not only was sure it could be done but that it had to be done.

I crawled up as far as I could go and located a gap where I thought it would be possible to get through after dark. I looked over the enemy territory a long time and finally spotted a place which looked good, about fifteen hundred yards behind the forward defense zone. It was a small rise, covered with brush. It was too low to be used by the Jerries for observation on our positions and too small to be used for anything else but it would be perfect for my purpose. Most important, there didn't seem to be anyone or anything alive near it. One of the reasons for that was the wide gap between the Nazi infantry and artillery. All through the campaign, the Jerries usually planted all their field pieces away back, a good deal farther behind their leading elements than we did on our side.

Barrett and Byrnes got together with me early in the evening and they finally okayed the idea. According to our final arrangement, I was to turn on the radio just once and just long enough to say "Kennard" after I was located. Then Barrett was to line up all the artillery he could. Once I started, in order to cut down the use of the radio and prevent its being located as long as possible and at the same time report the maximum number of targets, they were to be given in series of three or four and each mission was to be given in only four words, such as "Left three, over five. Left six, over two. Right four, short three." Each of these would be a separate fire mission, the numbers meaning hundreds of yards and the other words the reference to the base point. All necessary adjustment direction was to be in a maximum of four words in the same way. Target identification was to be given only when necessary to indicate whether the lights, mediums or heavies should take it.

While we were talking, the Jerry artillery interrupted us occasionally, with what effect we didn't know until, when we had about finished the details, Byrnes had a telephone call. All we heard him say was, "Yes, sir" but when he turned back to us, even in the dark we could see an odd expression on his face.

He said, "Major Barlow has just been wounded. I've been ordered back to the CP to take over the battalion. I'll have our end of it ready when you're under way."

You don't congratulate a man on a boost which comes over the body of another man, especially someone like Major Barlow. So we just shook hands with him. He turned the company over to his senior first, then he and Barrett started back and I went to break the news to Barney. He raised the roof when he found he wasn't included in the party.

"What would I be doing all by myself over here?" he said. "It would be just like sitting in the bleachers and watching the game when you're a member of one of the teams that's playing. It's going to be awfully tough for just one man." . . .

XVI

THINGS became so quiet we started before midnight. All the excitement was in our minds. Actually, it was dull and tiresome. As an added precaution, we blackened our faces commando style and headed straight for the gap in the Jerry front. We were moving single file, about ten yards apart, Barney and I each carrying a radio case with Phillips lugging all the wire and the tele-

phone and running the line at the same time as he crawled along. We spotted only one patrol and we never will know to which side it belonged because it was making as little noise as we were and it passed about twenty yards to our left.

When we started through the gap, the enemy positions on both sides of us were absolutely silent. Barney and I waited for Phillips to catch up with us and then we had troubles. He wanted to keep going. When I told him there wasn't a chance, he kept edging forward and I'd have to chase him down because we couldn't speak above a whisper. . . . I finally had to make it a positive order to him to go back. . . .

When he was gone, Barney and I separated again, he taking over the telephone line. As I was carrying both radio cases, he didn't have much trouble keeping pace with me. But going through the enemy positions was about as dramatic as reading the telephone directory. Absolutely nothing happened, then, or after we were well inside the Jerry lines.

We slowed down a little to make it easier to watch our step because there were plenty of Jerries not too far away but our luck held until we were within thirty yards of the rise we were headed for and then we had a shock. There had been no Jerries around that position when I looked it over during the afternoon but there were some there now and, judging from the noise they were making with their shovels and their grumbling gutturals, they had just arrived. At that moment, I blessed Phillips for having delayed us, otherwise Barney and I might have been on that rise when the Jerries came.

The worst factor was the indication that the enemy was moving around in an area where he hadn't been before. I crawled away until I was well out of earshot of the group on the rise, waited for Barney, told him what was up and that he'd better stick close to me while we looked for a new spot.

LUCK TURNED OUR WAY AGAIN. We ran into no more of the enemy and about ten minutes later we found what we were hunting, something like an overgrown mound, too small to be called a hill, apparently useless except to us, and it was covered with heavy brush.

We picked a spot for the radio where the bushes were particularly thick, listened until we were sure no one was near us, then began digging as rapidly and noiselessly as possible, spreading the dirt we unearthed under the bushes, hoping we were doing it well enough so it wouldn't be detected by daylight. When we were pretty well along with that, I crawled to a slightly higher spot which had the same heavy undergrowth and began digging my own foxhole, one of the bottle shaped kind into which I could slide down if necessary.

Before I was finished, Barney came over with the remote control, then went back to the set and I made my one word broadcast. In less than five seconds, I heard the "Right" which meant I had been heard and we switched off.

Barney slipped off into the dark to bring in the telephone and I went on digging. We had worked at night so much that by now we could see fairly well with nothing more than starlight to help. I looked around to orient myself, then crouched down in the foxhole, shaded the opening and studied my map by flashlight. The most pleasant realization was that our position was almost directly on the gun-target line from the battery position to the base point, which would make calculations much easier. The base point itself was about five hundred yards beyond us toward the enemy rear. It looked as if we were lucky to have missed out on our first choice of positions.

Barney wriggled up with the telephone about two hours later. He said he had buried the wire as he came along and it was underground most of the last two hun-

dred yards to our mound, except for short stretches where it practically hid itself under the brush. He gave me some slack, clipped on the instrument, then slipped away again to bury the last stretch of wire up the slope. . . .

I crawled down into the foxhole again to cover my voice, then called the battery for a check. I hadn't more than identified myself to the battery operator when Barrett was on the line. He said, "I thought you'd be behind 'em by now." When I told him I was, he asked, "With a telephone?" I said "Yes" and he came back, "My God!" I said, "I'll be calling," and shut off.

Just in time, too, Barney barely had finished covering the line into the foxhole when we both heard the tramp of feet behind us. We just flattened out and held our breath.

A considerable body of Jerries was coming and we thought they would climb right over us but, at the last moment, they veered and went around the hump. After they had passed, Barney was starting for his own dugout when we heard some more boots. These went around the other side of us and faded toward the forward positions. Barney made a quick crawl to his own hole and then we heard still more troops in motion. For the next hour, they were moving up, all headed forward, but none of them stopped anywhere near us. But that they were massing for a strong stand was certain.

Then, at last, the sky began to turn gray and a few minutes later, I could see that this was a good place. From here, we could see everything the Jerries had on this sector. I verified that we were on the base point gun-target line and, as it grew a little brighter, saw that the Jerries had brought up just about everything they had during the night. There were so many targets in sight, I hardly knew where to begin. I made some quick calculations on those that seemed the most important, then dropped down into my foxhole and called Barrett.

"Ready?" I said.

"With lots of artillery," he answered, "and the doughboys are set to go."

"Okay," I said, "let's go." I gave him four missions, then straightened up to observe results. For about thirty seconds there was absolute quiet. Then there was a regular hurricane of blasts and hell came down on the Jerries.

After that it was wild, the wildest experience I've ever known. As we had expected, when daylight came on, adjustment of fire became practically unnecessary. The shells were smashing in on their targets on the first round time after time. I was pattering out missions and adjusting fire as fast as I could pour out the words. . . .

Our guns just ripped up and down the sector, smashing target after target, crashing into the middle of troop concentrations and making an inferno of the whole area. When the Jerries opened up with their artillery, the batteries signed their own death warrants because that made it easy to spot them and our mediums and heavies did the rest.

I lost all sense of time so I don't know how long we had been giving them all kind of fire when the confusion started. The Jerries didn't know where to turn. Their positions were being blown to pieces. When they tried to leave them, they ran into a hail of steel and TNT in the open. When they tried to burrow into their holes, our time fire got a lot of them and discouraged the rest. Their officers charged around, barking orders, trying to get the men back into some kind of order but they weren't having much luck.

Then all along the advanced zone, machine gun, rifle and mortar fire became terrific. I wondered what had been wrong with our fire on those positions until I saw Jerries begin to pour back from there and realized it was our own doughboys who were doing the shooting.

I tried to call for fire on the retreating Heinies and discovered the telephone had gone out at last but, by

that time, it had served us mighty well and more than vindicated Barney for suggesting it. . . .

Away up ahead, I could see our doughboys coming into sight, now. Then I heard a lot of racket behind us and turned to see the Jerries bringing up field pieces—eighty-eights and one-o-fives—rushing them into position for point-blank fire. They swung out on both sides of our mound and it looked as if we were going to be in the middle of the line but they were far enough away on both sides so they couldn't hear or see us yet.

I called for fire on them and told Barney to keep his head down because, while we were a little above the guns and not too near them, any stray shell of ours could annoy us. In fact, it wouldn't even have to be a stray and I began to get some idea of how Rick must have felt that last day.

The Jerries had just loaded their guns when a curious thing happened. It sounded as if two of our shells hit with only a split second difference between them beside one of the eighty-eights. The gun seemed to sail straight up into the air and then it exploded. I heard the chunks of metal sizzling past my head. . . .

I tried to call in another mission but nothing happened. I climbed out of my foxhole and wriggled over to Barney's dugout. Barney was unconscious and for a second I thought he was dead. . . . a bump on the side of his head. . . . I poured some water on the bump and on his face from my canteen and he was just blinking his eyes and coming back to consciousness when I heard somebody yell, "*Schweinhund!*" behind me—to a Nazi, everybody is a "*Schweinhund*" who isn't on his side—and I swung around to see a Jerry leveling his rifle at me.

I thought this was it, all right, but just as he was pulling the trigger, another Heinie jumped at him, yelled, "*Dumkopf!*" and gave him a sock on the jaw that sent him rolling and the shot went over my head. Barney had pulled himself into a sitting position and was shaking the fog out of his head when this second Jerry covered us with a pistol and barked, "*Haende auf!*" There wasn't much doubt as to what he meant, so our hands went up.

"This is a fine finish," Barney muttered. The Jerry waved his pistol at him and yelled, "Still!" and then, "*Kommen sie. Mach schnell,*" and he waved us out of the dugout.

We crawled out and tried to sneak a look toward the front to see whether there were any chance of our gang getting there in time to rescue us but the Jerry pushed us around and then, in practically perfect English said, "To the rear. Hurry. We want you alive. That fool would have shot you."

Barney said, "Thanks, pal," but after that we didn't have a chance to speak. We were given the Nazi version of the bum's rush and it was a good one. I don't know why we weren't knocked off by the fire from our own men because we were on our feet and practically running but they missed us and the next thing we knew, we were bundled into some kind of truck and were high-balling toward the Nazi headquarters. . . .

(After questioning by various German officers, Kenard and Barney were taken, with other prisoners, to Bizerte.)

XVII

WE were marched down to the harbor and rowed out to an Italian coastal steamer which was serving as a transport. It was anchored well out from shore. Our bombers hadn't left Bizerte enough docks to flag a handcar.

We were crammed into a sort of oversized cage with some forty or fifty other American and British prisoners,

below decks. It was hot down there but not as dirty as our cell on shore. There were no bunks, just some benches, because the run to Italy was short. . . .

There was a good deal of commotion all over the ship and one of the Britishers who understood Italian said he heard a sailor who passed our cage say we were going to pull out after dark. Our gloom over the news was becoming as thick as fog when we began hearing more explosions, which spelled another raid.

The bursts were much nearer this time and finally came one which almost deafened us and the ship gave a lurch that made us sure it had been hit. Then the bombing stopped. We could hear a lot of shouting in Italian and a little later, our Italian-speaking Britisher hailed another sailor who told him the bomb had damaged the ship just enough so it would not be able to leave that night, but repairs would be made so we could leave with a convoy in the morning.

We stretched out wherever we could find room and grabbed what sleep we could. In the morning, after some more unspeakable food, our interpreter learned the ship was ready to go and all the crew were on edge to get under way before our bombers started coming over on the milk run. Finally, the engines began to throb and we felt the ship moving. We were on our way to a German prison camp.

XVIII

WE all felt pretty low. We hadn't said much about it but there wasn't one of us in that cage who hadn't hoped and more or less believed some miracle would happen and that our army would capture Bizerte before the convoy could pull out. Now that long chance had faded.

I guess the captain of the transport figured there wasn't much danger of our starting anything so, after we had been under way for a while, some guards came down and unlocked the cage and waved us toward the deck, telling our British interpreter we could take the air for a couple of hours but would have to stay in formation.

When we reached topside, we were passing the headlands above Bizerte and heading for the open sea. . . .

The crew of our transport seemed to spend most of its time looking back toward Bizerte, eyes aloft and worried. We took on the habit, except that we were anxious instead of worried. I don't know just how long we had been at it when we saw the specks in the sky, so far away we weren't sure they meant anything. Then one of the Italian sailors let out a yell and pointed at them. In a second, everybody in the crew was jabbering and waving his arms. . . .

The specks in the sky were growing both in size and numbers and they began to look a lot like Fortresses and Liberators and Lightnings.

The ship veered sharply to starboard and began to zigzag away from the rest of the convoy which was trying its best to scatter. But it needed more time than they had with troubles coming at better than three hundred miles an hour. Almost before our ship was away on its first tack we heard that whistling scream which only a P-38 makes in a dive. I don't think it occurred to any of us just then that we were in as much danger as the crew of the ship. All we did when that twin-tailed Lightning came swooping down on us was wave and yell at the top of our voices. I guess all that saved us was the sharp change in direction the ship was given as the plane dropped its two eggs. One of them fell a good hundred and fifty yards away. The other was nearer, near enough so the ship gave a heave which almost knocked us off our feet. The anti-aircraft guns were peppering away at the

Lightning but apparently did not even come close because the plane simply zoomed up and began circling to come back for some strafing.

Then it suddenly seemed as if the whole sky were full of our planes, the fighters and the heavy and medium bombers, winging down on the whole convoy. The air was just a solid roar of flak and exploding bombs and machine-gun fire from the planes. Over to the west, we heard a terrific explosion, followed by several others in quick succession and we saw one of the convoy ships wrapped in a blinding sheet of flame.

It was about that time the captain of our transport awoke to the fact that all his prisoners were on the deck and he ordered us rushed below. Our protests didn't help us. The guards came at us with bayonets and we were hustled down to our cage.

The noise overhead was terrific and the ship was bobbing around like a cork as the skipper tried to wriggle it through that barrage of bombs. How we escaped a direct hit is beyond me. Even the big four-motored planes were flying exceptionally low before they dropped their loads. . . .

Sailors were running back and forth past our cage constantly, always yelling excitedly at each other. Our interpreter kept listening. Suddenly, he seemed to be startled and his face looked as if he didn't dare believe what he heard. We began asking him what went on but he waved us to be quiet and yelled a question at one of the passing sailors who barked just, "Si," as he rushed on up to the top deck. The Britisher swung toward us, grinning from ear to ear and he yelled, "Bli'me, the ship's giving it up. We're headed back for Bizerte. Thought that was what the blighters were saying."

We let out a roar at that, only hoping it was true, not caring a damn that we stood a swell chance of being blown up any minute on the way. Anything seemed better than going on to a Nazi concentration camp.

The hellish racket above us went on and on. It seemed endless and all of us began to be half seasick from the ship's constant change of pace and direction. Whatever else may have been the matter with him, that Italian skipper knew how to juggle his ship under an air attack.

Then the bomb bursts suddenly stopped and anti-aircraft fire died away, so we knew the raid was over. We wondered if the skipper would change his mind now and try for Naples again. Our British pal hailed a passing sailor—they still seemed to be hopping around like fleas—and stopped him long enough to learn that seven ships of the convoy had been sunk or set afire and there wasn't a chance in the world of our skipper's trying to make Italy practically alone.

We whooped it up again—a little too soon. Just a couple of minutes later, all the anti-aircraft guns were blazing away again and once more came the crash of exploding bombs. Barney looked at me and said, "Something tells me the skipper's luck has just about run out. From here on the percentage is all against him."

He barely had the words out of his mouth when we heard a terrific explosion which made us all stone deaf for a few seconds. The ship seemed to jump out of the water, then settle back with a kind of quiver which wasn't so good. We heard a lot of wild yelling and the ship pitched and rolled as if it were on another drunk. Not one of us doubted the transport was going to sink. We began beating against the cage and yelling to be released and given a chance to get on deck at least.

If the skipper had been a Nazi, I'm dead certain we would have been left where we were but, even if they have strayed pretty far in the wrong direction, most Italians have a heart and a sense of decency. This skipper hadn't had time to hear about our howling to be set free so he undoubtedly thought of it on his own. Anyway, our guards came down, unlocked the cage and let us up on deck.

When we scrambled up to the open air, the sky was full of our planes again, circling around and apparently getting ready for the kill. That was probably the only time we ever hoped our bombers would miss their target. We already were so close to port it was tough to realize our chances of making it were so slim.

Forward the deck was a shambles with a huge hole in the deck itself. But this was only half the story. Barney leaned over the rail and pointed toward the bow. We all looked over and saw a gaping hole just above the water line.

Then the ship went into a funny maneuver. The skipper swung it completely around and, to help me, he started into the Bizerte harbor, stern first, running away from the hole in the bow so he wouldn't ship water.

Another bomb came down and we all fell on our faces while it splashed into the water alongside and exploded. The transport gave another sickening lurch and then a sailor came running up from below decks, yelling something which the Britisher interpreted as a report that there was another hole in the side. . . .

We could see the skipper up on the bridge, shouting orders, trying desperately to keep his ship under way. Then another Fortress came swooping down. We saw the bomb bay open and the egg dropped out, straightened and then we heard that whistling sound a falling bomb makes. As we flopped again we knew it was going to be a direct hit. The explosion was so tremendous, we were completely stunned for a few seconds while the ship jumped and heaved and splinters of metal and wood showered in all directions. Three or four of our fellows were nicked by them.

When the fog cleared out of our heads and we looked up, we knew this was the finish. The bridge and all the superstructure around it was gone, completely wiped out—the skipper, too, of course—and the whole after part of the ship was on fire. We barely had time to notice that much when another explosion knocked us over. This hit was forward and all the twisted wreckage there began blazing, too.

THERE HAD BEEN a lot of casualties. Dead and wounded members of the crew were all over what was left of the deck. When we jumped up and started for the lifeboats which was all there was left to do now, we discovered one of the British prisoners had been killed by the last bomb.

What happened after that wasn't pretty. A bunch of the sailors went into a panic. Some of the lifeboats had been damaged, naturally, but, with all the casualties, there still were plenty for everyone left alive. But these hysterical Italians went crazy and started clawing and beating their way over everybody else. Our guards were trying to keep some semblance of order and led us toward boats which could handle all of us easily when that screaming gang came charging at us, very obviously to trample us down and take our boats.

That called off all bets. We had been tired of inaction anyway and we just decided no panic-stricken sailor was going to be saved over our shining white bodies. We sailed into them, whaling away with both fists. It was a little one-sided because they were only scared while we were mad and knew what we wanted to do. The funny part of it was our guards stayed with us and helped. I don't know how many of them we knocked cold but we plowed through and climbed into the boats. When the hysterical ones tried to jump in and push us away, we either bopped them back on deck or pitched them into the ocean. We weren't particular. Two of our guards climbed into each of the boats and they kept their guns trained on the wild mob on deck as we lowered away. . . .

As soon as we hit the water, we started pulling the oars, hoping to God, now, that our fliers would be tired of shooting our way. Barney and I had stayed together through the whole mess and he was on an oar just across

from me. When I looked over at him he was grinning. I asked him why and he said, "I was just thinking—this is the most advanced forward observation post we've ever had. I just never figured we'd ever have one in a row-boat." Then he said, "Now, if we just had a radio—"

"We'd ask those fellows upstairs to use something else for a target," I said.

Barney sobered and looked up and saw the planes circling over us. He said, "Wouldn't you think they'd have had enough by now? I don't think a single ship of that convoy is still floating."

I said, "Their orders are to kill and keep on killing until there's no enemy left to knock off. We're just unlucky to be mixed with the wrong gang." I was feeling a little grim about it. The shore, only a couple of hundred yards away now, was so near and yet so far.

Just then, the planes dived for us. Their eggs and machine-gun fire sprayed all around us. One of the boats filled with Italian sailors vanished completely in the explosion of a direct hit. We saw men keel over in some of the other boats. In our own, one of our guards caught a machine-gun bullet through the shoulder.

We pulled those oars until it seemed as if our arms would drop off, trying to get to shore before any more planes came our way. But we were landlubbers and not very good at it. We were still a hundred yards from shore when our planes came down again. We tried waving at them but, of course, that did no good. One of them came shooting by, right over our heads. There was a heavy explosion and I was knocked loose from my oar. I heard the crash of splintering wood and then I saw the other side of the boat had been bashed in completely so that we were sinking and Barney was lying huddled in the water in the middle of the boat, his whole side a mass of blood.

All I had time to do was heave him up on my shoulder and tumble upside just as the boat turned turtle. It was heavy going, swimming with all my clothes on but it wasn't so far to shore now and I made it by trailing Barney behind me, doing my best to keep his head out of water.

The planes overhead were still strafing away. Their machine-gun bullets were whistling past us and their bombs were dropping everywhere. When I finally touched bottom and struggled on shore, I could see only two lifeboats still afloat, although a good many of the occupants of those which had been sunk were making it to shore.

I dragged Barney up above the water line and ripped away his shirt. The gash in his side looked bad and I went through my pockets trying to find something with which I could give him first aid. I could see another of the lifeboats nearing shore not far away when a bomb burst directly in front of it. I felt a numbing shock in my leg as I fell down but for a second I had the crazy idea it was just concussion.

I heard a lot of wild yells on the shore above me. When I looked up, I thought I was delirious because I was seeing American soldiers, a lot of American soldiers, charging down the slope toward us. All the Italians who had reached shore had their arms in the air. It came to me sort of vaguely that the air strafing had stopped. I tried to stand up but found I couldn't, so I raised my arms, too, but I waved them to let our soldiers know I was one of them, not surrendering to them.

I tried to yell. Maybe I did. I don't know. A terrific pain shot through my leg. I looked down and saw I was blood from hip to ankle and there was blood on my chest and arms. I began to feel dizzy. All I could think was that, somehow, the nightmare of being a prisoner was over and we were back with our own gang. I tried to yell and wave at them again. For a second there seemed to be a lot of them all around me. Then the lights went out.



Illustrated by John Fulton

A Strong, Willing Man

HE was not tall; was, on the contrary, rather on the short side, yet with great width of shoulder and barrel chest braggingly thrust out. Handsome enough to go on with—as he said of himself—in spite of the crooked brown scar across his high-bridged nose. A badge of honor, he described it, claiming he had received the wound while battling valiantly for His Most Catholic Majesty, the King of Spain.

"The King," he would add, "is my well-beloved cousin, I being a grandee of Castile, though today I prefer to be known as plain Pedro Aguirre. The reason why I changed my name? Ah—a woman was the reason. A woman who broke my heart—my fortune—but never my stout pluck!"

So he would say—and lie abominably, except in the matter of pluck.

Born and bred in the Barcelona slums, a man of hardy soul, looking to violence and strong-thewed vitality to help his loose living, he had come to Peru ten years earlier as one of Pizarro's tough troopers. The best way for him had always been the back way, and the moon his lamp, and a neat blade trick of parry and lunge his salvation when cornered.

A scoundrel if ever there was one, though there was about him an ingenuous vanity that sat on him almost like a virtue; wandering here and there, with his whims for guidance; and so he came one day to a valley that stretched, quiet and fertile, not far from Cuzco.

The people here were Spanish peasants who had come to Peru on the martial heels of Pizarro's conquest; not to fight for Inca treasure, but to till the soil. They were hard-working and hard-headed; shrewdly looking to their plenty; not wasteful nor overgenerous, charging full value for whatever food or gear they might sell to passing stranger.

So it was today when Pedro strode among them, announcing in an insolent, bullying trumpet of a voice that he was hungry and thirsty and needed meat, bread, cheese and wine. Felipe Silva, the alcalde, stepped forward with some of the villagers. He looked at Pedro. He considered that the latter's clothes were ragged and his purse, doubtless, slim.

by ACHMED ABDULLAH



"Food," he suggested, "costs money." Pedro seemed astonished.

"Money," he asked, "between gentlemen?"

"I am not a gentleman."

"But you have the privilege of talking to one, O vile smugface!"

"That may be so."

"It"—threateningly—"is so!"

"Yes, yes. Still—how will you pay?"

"With iron," was the prompt reply. "Is there better currency? Ah"—as one of his four Toledo daggers leaped to his hand—"how do you like the smell of it?"

Felipe receded rapidly.

"Be pleased not to kill me!" he begged.

"Kill you?" Pedro smiled spitefully, with thin lips. "No, no! At least, not yet. Only—whoso matches words with me, must match steel. Watch closely!" There was, the next second, a whirring sound as a red-necked vulture winged low among the trees and immediately a flash and spurt as the

dagger flew forth, and struck the bird in midair. "And now," he roared, "food and drink, O base-born cattle, before I lose my long-tried patience!"

The villagers grumbled. Momentarily they lost their timidity. They questioned each other with glistening eyes. Should they attack this arrogant ruffian? Should they make a concerted rush and cut him down?

Fingers handled scythes and rakes. Then, quickly, fingers withdrew. For though one of the man's daggers was gone, nailing the dead bird to the ground, there were still three others protruding malevolently from his belt. Besides, a great sword was riding on his hip, sticking out insolently like a wren's tail—and there was his warning bellow:

"Careful, lads! Careful! Ah—death is my trade and hard violence my sport!"

Once again the villagers exchanged quick glances. Sure enough, somebody would be hurt. And then, when the alcalde shrugged his shoulders and told the stranger to come along, that food and wine would be his, there was loud, derisive laughter—and a woman stepped forward.

She was no longer in the bloom of youth, being thirty-five or thereabouts. Full-bosomed she was, and ripe and stately; of golden color, black-eyed, black-haired.

SHE pointed a contemptuous thumb at the peasants.

"So many against this lonely one," she said; and there was a foreign lilt and slur to her speech. "And not one of you daring to raise a hand! Pah—little men! Weak men! The tale of your cowardice will be round and round the world!"

Her laughter rose more shrilly, and Felipe trembled with rage.

"Back to your kennel, O heathen alien!" he shrieked.

"Alien? Yes. I am not Spanish—the Lord be praised!—being of Inca blood. But heathen? I'm as good a Christian as you."

"Back to your kennel!" the alcalde shrieked again.

He raised a gnarled, hairy fist to strike her. Then he gave a yelp of pain as one of Pedro's daggers slashed across his wrist.

The woman bowed her thanks to Pedro. He looked at her. He was silent for a second, and his first thought was:

"By the Trinity! Here is a black-haired one that could make a tough man's heart turn over!"

And his second thought was: "Like the edge of soft dreams she is—that come to man in loneliness and strange places!"

But he did not tell her so, such not being his way. Instead he said:

"Presently, after I've eaten my fill, I shall do you the honor of kissing your red lips."

She bit these same lips, and frowned.

"The—honor?"

"Indeed. For am I not a grandee of Castile, son and grandson of kings, and—"

"Great-grandson," she interrupted, "of liars and thieves and shameless rogues. Save your fine tall tales for these stupid peasants!"

He flushed. "You think you know a lot about me, eh?"

"More than I care to know, being modest and virtuous."

"Still—you do not know all." His anger had vanished. This, he reflected, was a woman after his own heart: keen, fearless, and none of your blushing, simpering, mealy-mouthed maidens. "You see," he went on, and he drew her aside a little, "you do not know that some day soon you will be warm and friendly in the crook of my elbow."

He turned away from her; continued carelessly, speaking over his shoulder:

"Don't bother me now! For I'm hungry—and food is more important than kisses."

This time it was the peasants who laughed derisively, while she hurried away, shaking with sobs, and thinking:

"I hate him, hate him!"

And then, since there are the curious quirks in a woman's soul, she said to herself:

"How strong he is, how brutal—this scoundrel! And how merry his eyes! How curly his brown hair! And—oh, I wonder if it is soft to the touch."

Elisa was the name which she had received in baptism, her Indian name being strange and unpronounceable. And they spoke about her, later on, in the alcalde's house, after Pedro had dined exceedingly well off a haunch of venison.

She was, it appeared, of princely Inca race, the last of her family. All her people had been killed by Pizarro's troopers. She had been brought up by a kindly old Spanish priest, dead these many years, and she lived alone up the hill beyond the village.

She was disliked by everybody—less because she was an alien than because of her haughtiness.

"Presently, I shall do you the honor of kissing your red lips," said Pedro.



"Why," said one of the villagers, "who does she think she is, with her airs and graces? Nothing but an Indian! And many is the man who has offered her his hand in marriage."

"Carlos, the vintner, for instance—" "And Alfonso Gomez, the richest farmer hereabouts."

"Even I myself, the alcalde," said Felipe, "wanted to take her into my house when my old wife—God rest her soul!—passed on. But she, the Indian hellcat, she laughed at me."

"Thereby," commented Pedro, over the rim of his glass, "showing a deal of honest sense and fair taste." He thumped the table. "More wine!"

Another bottle was brought. He drank. And Felipe asked:

"Shall we prepare a parcel of food?"

"I've had enough. Thanks."

"I mean—food for your journey."

"I'm not going—yet."

"Oh?"

"I like it here," Pedro smiled, "and shall stay awhile. Unless, of course"—toying with one of his daggers—"you grudge me bed and board?"

"No, no!" the alcalde assured him. "You shall be our beloved guest. Stay as long as you please!"

"Spoken like an hidalgo," And Pedro rose. "This Elisa," he demanded, "where does she live?"

"Over there." The other pointed through the open door. "Take the path by the side of the church."

PEDRO strode off. The villagers left too; Felipe sat there brooding. He was wounded in his pride. Yet more deeply wounded in his avarice when he considered that here was this

raffish stranger forcing him to supply food for nothing. And what an appetite! The best part of a haunch of venison! And what a thirst! Two bottles of wine—hardly half a glass left in the second.

No use wasting it. He tilted the bottle to his lips, drank to the dregs. It gave him a sort of false courage, so that not long later, when Pedro returned, the alcalde grinned as he saw that both the other's eyes were blackened, and five red lines were etched on his face.

"Did the Indian cat scratch you?" he demanded maliciously, with a hiccup.

"She did. But—by Our Lady!—she didn't hurt me half as much as I shall hurt you."

Pedro unbuckled his belt. He put Felipe across his knees. He fell to belaboring him; and with every stroke

he stated the reason—reason, that is, sufficient to himself.

"Take this"—*thwack*—"because she tried to close the door in my face! And this"—*swish*—"because, when I put my foot beyond the threshold and kept her from shutting me out, she clawed at me! And this"—*biff*—"because, when I kissed her, she smote me with a skillet! And this"—with a final, painful *smack*—"because, being a fool, I love her!"

He rose, spilling Felipe on the floor. He picked up the bottle; saw that it was empty.

"Bring wine, vile flea-pasture!" he shouted.

Such was Pedro's introduction to the valley. Yet after a while the people found him less of a burden than they had feared. For if he did not pay for bed and board one way, he paid another. Several times he chased off marauding Indians; and when a large party of them stole a dozen horses, including a valuable stallion recently come from Spain, and the villagers complained bitterly, he cried:

"Enough of this womanish whining! I myself, single-handed, shall attend to this small matter."

He made good his boast. He rode after the robbers; and he brought back

not only the horses, but a pocketful of carved gem-studded Inca gold and seven span of oxen—giving the oxen, with a grandiose speech, to the community as a whole, and presenting the jewels as a wedding gift to the alcalde when the latter took Maria, the blacksmith's daughter, to wife.

THEREFORE, despite his rowdyish behavior, his popularity increased. He basked in it, being a simple man at heart; and all might have been for the best, had it not been for Elisa.

Every day he spoke to her of love, telling her that his soul was beneath her narrow feet; and every day she replied:

"Pick your soul up again! It's gathering dust—and I do not love you."

Then, when he tried to plead with her, she exclaimed:

"Do you not understand plain Spanish? I do not love you, fool!"

"But—"

"Go away! I hate you!"

Yes, she would assure herself, she hated him. Hated his great strength, his great laughter, his great bragging. Hated his gray eyes, his curly brown hair. . . .

No, she thought, not really brown. Something like a reddish glint to it, chiefly in the sun. And soft to the touch—was it?

Pah! What matter, since she hated him.

"I hate you!" she repeated.

He stared at her; and his heart drummed.

How could she hate him, since he loved her? What was wrong with him? Many girls had loved him in the past. Why not Elisa? Was it, perhaps, that she wanted marriage?

Maybe. Some girls, he knew, were queer that way.

He sighed. If marriage it had to be, marriage it would be.

"Be my wife!" he said.

"Never!"

"Please—"

"Never! Pah!" And every word was like the sting of a whip. "Rather Ramón, the village half-wit, than you, O worthless vagabond!"

He was deeply hurt; went back down the hill to where he made his home, at the house of the alcalde.

The latter's young wife Maria was not bad-looking in a rosy, roly-poly way. A pleasant woman, but not pleasant today; frowning as she prepared the midday frijoles, mumbling angrily to herself the while.

"What's wrong?" asked Pedro.

"My husband. Ah"—viciously slamming the pot on the stove—"less than a month we're man and wife. And he old enough—the Saints know!—to have



a measure of sense. Yet only last night I caught him making sheep's-eyes at Luisa, the miller's sister."

Then, when Pedro laughed, she demanded sharply:

"Why do you laugh?"

"Because I've found an answer to the riddle called woman."

Yes, he thought, he had found the answer. It was jealousy. And during the next few weeks, he gave up paying court to Elisa. Instead he made sure that she should see him, up the hill where her house was, and never alone. Always with a pretty girl or young married woman—Carmen today, Aurelia tomorrow, and Juanita the day after—since his was a clever trick or two with the women as it was with weapons.

And Elisa—was she jealous?

"How can I be?" she asked herself.

But her heart tightened when she saw him strolling through the woods side by side with Carmen, an arm about her waist; and the next evening saw him and Aurelia in a close embrace; and the following morning

And yet—jealous? No, no! And she told herself it was only righteous indignation when, one day, meeting Monteiro, the goatherd, she said to him:

"How you can permit the like is beyond me! And you proud Spaniards! Ah, you have less manliness in your hearts than there are hairs on a turtle's tail!"

The words struck home. Monteiro glowered. For the night before he had caught a soft glance between his wife and Pedro. Indeed, day by day Pedro grew less and less discreet in his flirtations, until throughout the valley suspicion reared its ugly head, and until, almost, the villagers' patient timidity reached its breaking-point.

Almost, but not quite; for there were still Pedro's four daggers, not to

mention his sword and his hard violence.

So tempers became more frayed. They cursed him, though never in his presence. And as Monteiro remarked—cursing broke no bones.

"It's the women's fault," he declared.

"Then," suggested Felipe suddenly, "let a woman mend it."

"How?"

Felipe smiled. He explained his plan. The villagers were jubilant; and that afternoon he said to his wife:

"I need your help."

She stared at him stonily.

"You won't get it."

"Listen—"

"I watched you and Luisa, the miller's sister, again last night. Making sheep's-eyes at her!"

"I—I did not mean it!"

"Your eyes did, O ancient goat!"

"Forgive me!"

"No!"

"Please, please! It'll never happen again! I swear it—by Our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection! I need your help! The whole village needs it!"

"My husband—
only last night I
caught him mak-
ing sheep's-eyes
at Luisa."

watched him pick up Juanita bodily to help her across a fence. And—oh, she thought, how strong he was! How arrogant! Arrogant the way he dragged his sword so that the tip of the scabbard clanked along the ground! Arrogant his gray eyes, his curly wind-tossed hair!





*Elisa's words struck home.
Monteiro glowered.*

He argued, cajoled, flattered, humbled himself. And it was not until, with much groaning, he had given her all his hoard of money and promised to buy her a brocaded gown the next time he went to Cuzco, that she agreed to do what he asked.

"When?" she inquired.

"Tonight. Why wait?"

Later in the evening Pedro—who had been up in the hills with Carmen—returned to the house. He shouted for wine; and it was Maria, not Felipe, who brought it.

"Where's your husband?" he asked.

"Oh," she sighed, "with Luisa, I suppose."

"A fool—to be tasting mere sugar when honey is waiting for him."

"Honey?" she echoed coquettishly.

"Yourself, *querida*."

Promptly he embraced her; and she gave a little cry of pain.

"Your sword-hilt, Pedro—it's bruising my side."

So he took off his sword and tossed it into the corner. He followed suit, presently, with his four daggers. He cared for Maria as little as for the other women in the valley. It was because of Elisa that he kissed her. Not that, just now, Elisa could see him, but somebody might be looking through the window, and the tale would spread—would reach Elisa's ear.

So he attended to his love-making with vigor—saw, all at once, too late, how he had been tricked.

For the door was pushed open. And there, pouring across the threshold, were the villagers, brandishing rakes and scythes, hate in their raucous voices—and he himself without as much as a small knife.

He did then what many a less brave man would have done. He did not argue, but went away from there quickly; out through the window, landing on his feet like some great cat, and away, out of the village and up the hill as fast as he could, with the men after him, cursing, yelling.

He increased his speed as a dagger—one of his own daggers—whistled past his ear. Faster and faster he ran; was well in advance of his pursuers as he got to Elisa's house at the edge of the valley.

He tried the door. It was closed.

"Let me in!" he called.

"No, no!"

"You must! Death is at my heel!"

THEN she heard the view-halloo of the chase. She swung the door open and saw, vaguely in the distance, the running villagers.

He tried to push past her.

"But," she asked, "where—if they find you here—"

"All I want is a weapon—any weapon at all." He smiled crookedly. "Your skillet will do—so that I can die fighting."

She shook her head.

"There shall be neither fighting nor dying tonight. Come with me! There is an old tunnel. The Chibcha Indians used it, years ago, when they were hard pressed by my Inca ancestors. I alone know it."

She led the way to the back of the house and down a steep cliff. The tunnel entrance was there, half buried

under rubbish. They cleared it away, working feverishly. They passed into the tunnel which, once upon a time, the Chibchas had dug through the living rock as a refuge in time of dire need.

For many minutes they walked. There was no sound of pursuit, perhaps because the villagers had not discovered their way of escape, perhaps because they were glad enough to be rid of both without bloodshed, being a peaceful folk at heart.

The tunnel came to an end with a faint point of light—light that broadened as the moon-rays silvered a farther valley. They reached a clearing and slept there; and in the morning, he said:

"How, hereafter, I'm going to make a living, with all my fine weapons gone, the Saints alone know!"

Then she turned on him.

"Tell me, O worthless vagabond," she exclaimed. "Have you ever considered or thought of the plain, decent paths of life?"

"But—"

She stared at him; and he was silent—and almost, he quailed.

They went on their way. They were tired, hungry. In the afternoon they came to a homestead. There was a stable, its door open. A Spanish farmer sat there milking, his head pressed against the flank of a cow.

He looked up; and Pedro asked:

"Have you work for a strong, willing man?"

"And for his wife," Elisa added.

A drama of the Alaskan Wilderness

*by Kenneth
Gilbert*



UPSTREAM a mile from where the Alaskan river broke into the sea, the wooded island appeared ghostly and unreal in the fog which clung about the stream's mouth. The place was wrapped in sepulchral silence, for the river-current merely whispered along the island's shores, and the boom of breakers along the rocky seacoast seemed faint and far away. Yet the silence of the island was broken abruptly by a gurgling, strangling sound that carried far on the water. On the heels of it came the rapping report of a rifle. There was a furious lashing of water just off the island beach, and then the swirling fog hid the disturbance.

"You killed that mother seal," said Joe Gibbon to his partner, Lud Crouse. "What'd you do it for? She's a hair-seal; her pelt aint worth a dime!"

Lud Crouse pumped another shell into his rifle; and his small eyes, set deep in his whiskered face, flickered as he spat on the sandy shore. Silence weighed. Behind the two men, their trapper-cabin stood at the foot of a rocky cliff sheltering it against the bitter williwaw winds which sometimes roared and shrieked for days. Smoke plumed from its chimney. On each side of the river they had been running their traplines upstream

throughout the winter, and with the last of the river-ice gone and the fur prime, they had been making good catches of mink, marten, lynx and sometimes a huge gray or black wolf. Another few weeks of it, and they would load their furs into the Indian-fashioned canoe drawn up on the beach, and strike out for the settlement.

The only question was whether the tension which had been growing between the two men throughout the long weeks and months of winter would snap before the job was finished. Cabin-fever had been riding the pair hard. They were unlike in temperament. Easy-going Joe Gibbon, who owned the traps and outfit, as well as the lease of the trapping country on both sides of the Kooguruk, had decided long ago that he'd made a mistake when he'd taken Lud Crouse in as a partner. There was something about Lud which made Gibbon uneasy, and this feeling had grown as the fur-catch got bigger and bigger. Lud Crouse began making plans for the following winter. Joe Gibbon knew that they'd never partner again, and hinted as much. But Crouse didn't seem perturbed. It was as though he'd figured things out. Next winter this cabin on the island in the river would be the warm and cozy head-camp for the trapline that

it had always been. But only one of the men who now occupied it would be here. As though Lud Crouse had put the thing in words, Joe Gibbon sensed that his partner planned to be that man.

Lud Crouse grinned now, hefting the rifle. The dead body of the mother seal had gone drifting away in the current, swallowed in the fog.

"Sure, that hair-seal aint worth skinnin'," he agreed. "Reason I shot her was that she's been robbin' our gill-net. We need salmon for trap-bait, don't we?"

"She didn't take enough fish to bother," Gibbon pointed out. "Like as not, she wouldn't have come into the river at all if it hadn't been for her pup. She's got it cached somewhere along the shore of this island. I suppose the pup will starve to death now."

Crouse chuckled to himself. "Don't think so," he replied. "I'm goin' to rub him out soon as I find him. Aim to keep this place clear of all seals."

Gibbon said nothing. From the fog-hidden shore came a sudden mewling cry.

"That's him now!" declared Crouse.

But Gibbon was already striding away, moving faster than the man with the gun. A hundred, two hundred yards he went; and then he saw movement at the edge of driftwood. Quickly he went there. Cached in the lee of an uprooted tree which the river had brought down and washed up on the shore of the island, was a small furry creature no larger than a four-weeks-old dog. As the man stood over him, the seal pup looked up and made its querulous cry of hunger. It was too young to know fear; there was no

WILD SAMARITAN

reason why it should be afraid of this towering two-legged creature who was so unlike the mother the little seal had known.

Gravel crunched behind Gibbon as he stooped and picked up the seal pup. He turned to see Lud Crouse confronting him, face dark with anger.

"What you aim to do?" Crouse demanded.

Gibbon stared at him a moment before answering. "I'm going to try to save this pup, if I can," he replied. "I don't aim to see it starve."

"It won't starve," Crouse reminded him grimly. "One whack with a club is all it needs. I wouldn't even waste a shell on it."

Gibbon held the baby seal in his arms, and its damp fur was like silk. "Get this straight," he told Crouse at last: "I said I'll save this pup if I can, and I meant it." It wasn't sheer kindness on his part. Crouse had challenged him, and Gibbon was in the mood to accept that challenge. Cabin-fever burned in both men. Gibbon was unarmed, while Crouse had a rifle. Crouse's face reddened

more deeply, and for a long moment his slitted eyes bored into those of the other man.

But presently a look of craftiness replaced the hatred in Crouse's gaze. He shrugged, rolling his eyes. "Why, sure," he agreed, "if it's *that* important to you—keep the dang' thing! But keep it out of my way!" He turned and stalked off along the beach, the gun cradled in his arms. He might be looking for more seals to kill; or he might have something else in mind. Gibbon stared after him thoughtfully; then went on up to the cabin, carrying the squirming pup.

JOE put the pup down, still crying from hunger. Then he spooned out a little powdered milk in a dish, mixed it with water, added a pinch of sugar. Thereafter he pawed through his stuff until he found an old glove. With his knife he punctured the finger-tip, filled it with the watered milk. A little dripped off the end. He took up the seal pup once more and began teaching it to take food. When Lud Crouse showed up at the

cabin a half-hour later, the pup was sleeping contentedly on Gibbon's bunk, its stomach distended with milk.

Crouse merely gave the thing a glance, grunted and went out again on business of his own. Joe Gibbon eyed the pup doubtfully, wondering if it would live. The water which he had mixed into the milk was lukewarm, but the ration doubtless wasn't just what the pup required at this stage. Anyway, Gibbon had a stubborn determination that the youngster would survive if he could possibly bring that thing about. He'd told Lud Crouse that he'd save it if he could. It seemed important right now to prove to Crouse that he intended to keep his word. Maybe the life of this helpless little animal who belonged to the sea didn't amount to much in the long run, but its salvation somehow figured in the bitterness which lay between the two men.

Gibbon's right hand stroked the sleeping pup. He noticed drops of milk which still clung to the whiskery little face, and he grinned. "That'll be your name," he decided. "Whisk-



ers!" He thought rather malevolently that such a name would irritate Lud Crouse, who wore a full beard. Joe Gibbon managed to shave often. Somehow it helped his morale during the long winter, when the morale of a man shut apart from the world, save for a partner whom he didn't trust, got low.

But that night nearly brought open break and possible bloodshed between the two men. For Whiskers, the seal pup, nearly died. Joe Gibbon tended the youngster constantly, because the powdered-milk diet evidently didn't agree. Crouse, likewise unable to sleep, finally exploded.

THERE were more harsh words. Joe saw to it that his rifle was never far from his reach; nor did he turn his back on Crouse. Each man let go the pent-up hatred which had been accumulating for months. But they did not come to actual warfare. When dawn broke at last, the pup was sleeping peacefully. Lud Crouse got himself a hasty breakfast and left for the trapline which he tended, the string which ran up the south bank of the river. Joe Gibbon, seeing that the pup was still asleep, likewise went out. Ordinarily he would have been gone all day, for his leg of the trapline—the north bank—had some sets which were a good fifteen miles upstream. Yet this time he cut it short. He got back soon after noon—and scarcely had he arrived when he discovered Crouse making swiftly for the cabin.

The pup was lying in Gibbon's lap, coaxing for more of the powdered milk and water which he was warming on the stove, when Crouse entered.

The man seemed surprised for a moment, but instantly recovered himself. He fussed around a spell, then went out again. Yet Joe Gibbon read his mind as plainly as though Crouse had revealed what actually lay there. Crouse had figured on coming back ahead of time and getting rid of the baby seal. Then he would go out on the trapline again, and when he once more returned, would express astonishment that the pup had vanished. Over the small matter of whether this seal pup lived or died, the distrust that each man had of the other had been fanned to white heat.

Joe Gibbon knew that Lud Crouse would not quit, that he would struggle to become victor no matter what the cost. Gibbon decided that hereafter he would never be caught far from his gun. . . .

There was a big fur-catch in the cabin as the result of the winter's work of the partners. Knowing Crouse's nature, Gibbon realized that the prize was great enough for the man to take a long gamble. Gibbon

could guess what that gamble would be. He intended it to fail. . . .

It was weeks later, when spring was reluctantly giving way to Northern summer, that the seal pup, Whiskers, who had taken to sporting himself in the watery shallows about the island, began to show signs of intelligence above that of the average of his kind.

Joe Gibbon had actually developed affection for the young seal, and this Whiskers reciprocated warmly. It seemed as though Whiskers understood that the man was responsible for saving his life, for he followed Gibbon about like a dog. It was only when the man was gone that Whiskers, evidently sensing the hostility which Lud Crouse bore him, made himself scarce. Joe Gibbon discovered that the youngster was terrified by gun-fire, and the man guessed the reason. No doubt, when Gibbon was away, Lud Crouse had tried to kill the seal, but the latter had been lucky enough to escape the bullets.

Gibbon taught the pup tricks. Whiskers learned to balance objects on his nose. He would also give his queer, chirping bark at command of Gibbon, who had become his man-god. Cleverest of all tricks, however, was the one which Gibbon had taught him concerning the fish-and-sugar trade.

Whiskers would thrust his furry head out of the water, a spring-run salmon gripped in his jaws, which were always set just back of the fish's head. Whiskers would make his gurgling cry, which carried far despite the fact that his mouth was half-closed by the fish he had caught. Thereafter, Gibbon would appear on the shore, a white lump of sugar displayed in his fingers. No sooner would Whiskers see it, than he'd make for the beach.

Like a well-trained duck-dog, he would carry his prize up to the master, drop it on the sand, and wriggle himself pleadingly. Gibbon would hand him the sugar lump, which Whiskers would gulp after a few crunching bites, always making a queer, wry face that never failed to get a chuckle from the man. Then the seal would go flopping back to the water in search of another fish. But this time he'd keep the fish for himself.

Never would he make the trade more than once. He liked just a taste of sugar—no more. The tender flesh of a salmon was more acceptable as food; yet it seemed that he craved a sample of the strange-tasting sugar, which none of his kind had doubtless ever eaten. Perhaps he loved sugar because he realized that Gibbon liked it too; it must be good if the man prized it.

Day after day he would go through his routine of tricks. Yet Whiskers

began to appear less and less frequently at the beach. Doubtless he had made the acquaintance of other seals which haunted the river-mouth, and they were teaching him the ways of the sea. It might be that he had begun to take notice of sleek females. Slowly he was beginning to come into his rightful heritage as spring began to hint grudgingly that the short Northern summer was not far off.

It was when Whiskers had been gone more than twenty-four hours, although Joe Gibbon several times patrolled the beach, calling for him, that the warming chinook wind told the men the trapping season was over.

Next morning they packed their stuff into the canoe. The fur-catch went first. There was only a little grub left, and they took it all, for they would need it in order to reach the trading post. The cabin was left bare except for a few cooking utensils which could be left behind. Then they climbed into the canoe, and Joe Gibbon saw to it that he took the stern-paddle, because he wanted to keep an eye on Lud Crouse.

YET the latter seemed to have changed somewhat; with apparent cheerfulness he took up the bow-paddle, and seemed relieved that they were getting away from the island and heading toward civilization. He even spoke civilly while they were loading the canoe.

Gibbon likewise felt better. Now that the prospect of once more being back in civilization was just ahead, the dark winter and the sinister hints of brooding discord between himself and his partner seemed part of a bad dream. He wondered a little if his fears hadn't been groundless. Almost he felt like apologizing to Lud Crouse for having entertained suspicion. Probably he had misjudged the man; probably it was just another case of cabin-fever. He was still in a forgiving mood when the thing happened.

They had been heading upriver. Forty miles upstream from the island was a portage where they would make a carry to the headwaters of Moose River, which flowed southward for some distance before finally emptying into the sea. Downstream fifty miles was the settlement. But Lud Crouse had the thing planned so that Joe Gibbon would never reach that portage.

It was nearing dark when the canoe grounded. They had to get out to shove off again; momentarily Joe Gibbon relaxed his vigilance, and for the first time that day, he turned his back to Crouse. . . . All Joe remembered was that the world seemed to explode into blazing fragments. He felt himself being lifted; then came the shock of icy water. On the heels of that came



consciousness for a brief second, then oblivion.

Joe Gibbon came to with the feeling that he was dead, and that he was in another world, a universe black and cold. Mechanically his muscles were responding to a subconscious urge—he was struggling, fighting, for no reason which he could understand. Then, as his senses cleared a little, it seemed that he could see brittle stars in the cold night-sky; he could hear, too, the whispering of water. Came awareness then that he was in the river, that he was supporting himself by arms thrown across a drifting log.

Vaguely he sensed what had happened. That moment when he had turned his back on Crouse, as they sought to shove the canoe free of the rocks, the man had struck out swiftly with the paddle. Thereafter Gibbon had been lifted and thrown into the river to drown. But the shock of the cold water must have aroused his natural will to live, for he had started swimming. How or when he had reached this log was something he could not remember. Nor did he have any recollection of how long he

had been in the water. All he knew was that he was numb with cold.

But he was still alive—that was the big thing. Through the gloom he could make out the brushy shore of the stream, and it was not far away. But the log was too big and heavy for him to push toward shore, and he dared not let go of it because he was too weak to make the swim alone. Nothing to do but hang on and pray that he didn't die. Something must happen soon. Either he would perish, or he would be miraculously rescued. But the latter chance seemed so remote as to be fantastic.

HIS mind went methodically back to work. It was hard to say how far he and Crouse had been upstream when the attack had occurred—maybe ten miles, maybe more. The sweep of the river was swift and relentless. It wouldn't take too long for this log to drift to the river's mouth, and the sea. Maybe he was near the sea now. He thought he could hear the muted booming of the surf, but it might be, instead, only the dull pounding of sluggish blood in his brain.

He tried to move his feet, and discovered that there was little if any feeling left in his legs. Good thing he hadn't tried to swim! The cold had paralyzed him from his feet up to his waist. It was still creeping upward; presently it would strike his heart, and then the end would come. He could still see the darkened shore slipping by swiftly.

Then he was aware that the shore appeared to be receding. That meant his log was caught in a swirling current. As he recalled the river, such currents were found not far from the mouth. The sea must be near. He'd be carried out into the breakers, to die swiftly and mercifully. About that moment he felt his body slewed aside in such fashion that it seemed he would be torn from the log. In panic he turned his head—and there was land on the other side of him, very near.

Another lurch, and now he realized that his feet were dragging on the gravelly bottom. The log turned, seemed to dart away from him as it was caught in a cross-current. He felt his hands slipping. Desperately

he tried to regain his grip, but it was no use. He was jerked loose, and the log slipped away in the darkness. At the same moment his head went under water—down, down until he could feel bottom with his hands. Then, with a thrust of his arms, he shot to the surface once more. Madly he began to crawl, using his arms only, for his legs and feet were useless.

The water grew more shallow. Now he could keep his head above the surface, and he plowed forward with all his strength lest he collapse before he reached dry land. When he stopped at last, he was half on the beach, half in the water. He lay there a long moment, getting his breath after the terrific exertion, then crawled out.

Once more he stopped, longer this time. He was free of the cold water, but the night chill struck at him through his soaked clothing. He realized that he'd have to get up and stir around, getting his sluggish circulation started once more, or he would die of exposure. Somehow he managed to get to his hands and knees and went waddling off like a bear, headed for the brush near by. The effort warmed him a little. Soon he found that he was on some sort of trail. This made the going easier. A trail such as this must surely lead to a cabin or camp, although he was not aware of any other human beings who

*Illustrated
by John E.
Costigan, N.A.*



*Joe moved to the door.
The seal was there wrig-
gling in delight at the
sight of the man whom
he loved.*

had wintered in this region, save Lud Crouse and himself.

But his strength was fast spending itself, and he knew he couldn't go on much farther. Yet as he rounded one bend, he saw a small clearing, with beach beyond. There, looming in the darkness, was the black shape of a cabin. Suddenly the truth smote him: it was *his* cabin! He was on the island where he and Crouse had wintered. He squandered the last of his stamina making the intervening distance to the door. There his senses left him.

When Joe Gibbon roused once more, the early sub-Arctic dawn of late spring was breaking. He was chilled and shaking, and his bones ached. But there was sensation in his legs and feet now. He managed to stand weakly, work the latch, and the door opened inwardly. He staggered inside.

When he was able to, he got a fire going; then, stripping off his wet clothes, he hung them around the sheet-iron stove, and huddled beside it himself, rubbing his flesh. He

blessed the forethought which had provided plenty of dry wood before he and Crouse had left the place. He knew he wouldn't have been strong enough to cut fuel, even though he had the tools with which to do it. Sitting there beside the roaring fire, he felt life flow back into his body once more.

Presently he felt hunger.

He looked about the place—and then recollection came alarmingly. The partners had cleaned the cabin of all grub when they'd set out the previous day. There wasn't a scrap left that would have interested a wood mouse. What, then, was going to happen to him? He had managed to save himself from the river, only to be doomed to a slower death on this bleak island where nobody ever came.

Slowly his mind came to grips with the predicament. There seemed no way out. He doubted if he could have swum to the mainland on either

side of the island, for it was a good mile away, even if he had been full-fed and strong. Now he was weak from exposure and hunger; and as time passed, he would grow weaker. But he was at least warm and dry for the time being.

THEN above the crackle of burning wood in the stove he heard a queer sound—a strange snuffing and scratching at the door. There was no animal on the island so far as he knew—yet there was something just outside, trying to get in. As realization smote him awesomely, he moved to open the door, hardly daring anticipate what he believed to be the truth.

Whiskers, of course! The seal, sleek and fat, was there wriggling in delight at sight of the man who had befriended him and whom he loved. And suddenly Joe Gibbon knew that he wasn't doomed to die after all.

Seal-flesh is one of the most nourishing of all meats, he knew. Whiskers was in prime condition. He had enough meat on him to keep a man alive for a couple of weeks, maybe a month. Even his hide would be useful. Joe Gibbon could remove it carefully, blow it up like a bladder, after the fashion used by Eskimos in making a buoy to mark the spot where a walrus they have harpooned is sunk with a spear in him and a long babiche-line trailing to the surface. With such a contrivance, Gibbon would have a life-preserver to keep him afloat while he made the long swim to the mainland.

Yet it was a tough thing to do. Still, when a man faces death, there is no time to be sentimental. Gibbon turned back into the room to pick up a stick of wood with which to club the seal to death; but Whiskers, as though reading the man's intention, barked twice and went flopping awkwardly toward the water.

Panicky now, for the seal might escape, Gibbon raced after the creature. But heavy and fat though he was, Whiskers could make remarkably good time. Just before Gibbon reached him, the seal plunged into the water with a loud splash, and vanished.

Gibbon was so disappointed he could have cried. He stood there on the beach, club still in hand, watching the spot where the seal had disappeared. Now that Whiskers knew the man intended to kill him, it was probable the animal would be frightened off, even as he had learned to keep away from Lud Crouse. For perhaps two minutes Gibbon watched, heart-sick, and was just about to turn back to the cabin to ponder his fate once more, when he saw the rounded head of Whiskers appear a hundred yards offshore. Gripped between the seal's strong jaws was a small salmon.

At once Whiskers began swimming toward shore.

Then for the first time Gibbon remembered the trick he had taught Whiskers. That he hadn't remembered it sooner was due to the confusion of his thoughts, the certainty that he was doomed to die. But he had no sugar. He knew Whiskers expected it. As the seal reached the beach, Gibbon sought and found a small, white stone.

He held it up where Whiskers could see it and the seal made a gurgling sound of recognition, coming on faster. A moment later he touched the beach, dropped the salmon on the sand, and flopped eagerly forward to receive his reward. But at sight of that tempting salmon, neatly killed with fang-marks just back of the head, Gibbon tossed away club and stone and seized the fish.

Whiskers stared at the man, puzzled. It was clear the seal was trying to figure out why it was that the man didn't do the usual things. Gibbon grinned at him in triumph, and the seal looked back with bright, inquiring eyes. Then as though having made a decision, Whiskers flopped back in the water again.

Too late, then, Gibbon cursed himself for having overlooked his opportunity. He could have killed the seal—but he had forgotten it, so glad was he to get hold of the fish. Now Whiskers was gone, probably forever. Yet even as Gibbon considered his own short-sightedness, the seal appeared once more. This time he had a bigger fish.

The king salmon were running. With them were schooled blackmouth, or young kings, weighing only about five pounds each. This was the size fish which Whiskers had brought in the first time. Now he had a lunker which writhed and fought despite the firm grip he had on its head. It looked to Gibbon as though it would weigh twenty pounds at least. Once

more Whiskers started eagerly for the shore.

Gibbon grinned as though he believed he could read the animal's mind. "He figured I wouldn't trade a lump of sugar for such a small fish," Gibbon reasoned, "so he's bringing me a bigger one!" Once more he picked up a white stone and held it aloft. Whiskers came on confidently.

But in his eagerness he dropped the fish almost in the water, so that Gibbon had to move quickly to retrieve the prize. Again he threw away the stone and leaped, falling on the fish. When he had the salmon captive, he looked around for Whiskers, but the seal had vanished.

Far out in the water the seal's head appeared. He turned and faced the man, made a gurgling grunt and sank from sight. And it seemed to Gibbon that Whisker's hoarse cry carried both reproach and farewell. If the man did not want to play the game fairly, Whiskers would have nothing more to do with him. But Joe Gibbon was content. He went back to the cabin, a fish in each hand. Now he was assured of life for a spell, at least. He might make these fish last him ten days, if he ate carefully.

HE still had four days of his fish diet yet to go when he heard a canoe grate on the gravel at the shore one morning. He stepped out to see old Mac Darrell, deputy marshal, walking slowly toward the cabin, a carbine slung handily between his hands. At sight of Gibbon, as the latter opened the door and stepped out, Darrell asked:

"Where's your pardner?"

Gibbon explained. Darrell listened closely, then nodded.

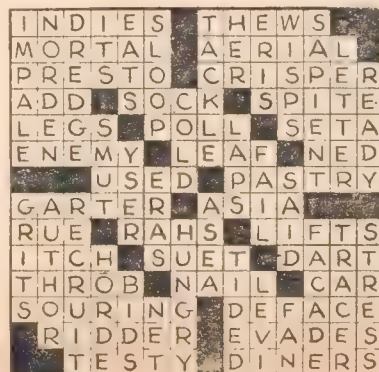
"That seems to tie in," he decided. "Couple of Injuns found your canoe wedged into a bunch of driftwood below some rocks. They searched down stream and found the body of Lud Crouse washed up on the beach in an eddy. Drowned, I reckon, because he didn't have no mark on him.

"I can still see that scar you got over your right ear, where you say he clouted you with a paddle. Well, when he did that, he must have fallen out of the canoe himself. I remember now, Lud couldn't swim. Anyway, he was a bad one. But the canoe and the fur-catch is safe. Reckon it's all yours now.

"But say, how in tarnation did you manage to live here for days when you didn't have any grub? You look as slick and fat as—well, as a seal!"

Joe Gibbon grinned. "I'll tell you about that, too, Mac," he replied, "even though you may think I'm a liar. It'll take some time and some telling—while we're on our way back to the settlement!"

Solution to Crossword Puzzle on page 59



*A novelette by
Donald Barr Chidsey*

Field

IT was past dawn when McClelland crawled out of his blankets, but almost as dark as night. Thunderheads clustered over the blue-purple hills of Turkey were in muttered conference as to the advisability of swooping upon the desert. The air was tight with the threat of a storm. On the ambulance, dew glittered like ice.

McClelland's first thought was of Catherine. He must find her. It had been a terrific shock, seeing her in a far, tough hole like Kametchliye. No doubt she was safe enough—as safe as anybody could be in this contradictory land of barbarism and civilization-gone-bad. After all, she was a British subject; even the wild desert tribesmen, even the scum of the frontier town on the Khabour, would think twice before offending her. All the same, he wanted to find her. What in the world was she doing here?

Captain Wilde, he saw, had risen and gone, after carefully rolling his blankets. McClelland folded the stretchers back into their racks, rolled and strapped his own blankets, and crawled outside to find his still warm "stove"—a sawed-off gasoline tin punched full of holes. He scooped several handfuls of sand into this, dumped in some gas, tossed a lighted match into it, put on the tin to boil water for tea. Captain Wilde had left him a little milk in the can, a little sugar; and he had a package of hardtack. This would be breakfast. He wasn't complaining. He'd asked for it. Nevertheless it seemed unfair that he should have to endure hardships of desert life while he was still several thousand miles from the real front, which was in Libya. When he came over as a volunteer driver for the American Field Service he had not expected to be attached to the British Ninth Army in Syria, a mere army of occupation—the Eighth Army had been his aim. Well, he'd get there soon; his transfer was coming.

He was sipping tea when Captain Wilde came back from the town. McClelland did not like this medical officer, who didn't like him and his easy informal American ways. In McClelland's eyes Captain Wilde suffered from the misbelief that God in person had fastened those pips to his shoulder-straps; and for his part, the Captain could not understand why he should be assigned a Yank driver instead of a properly obsequious Tommy. Still, McClelland was obliged to admit that the officer, if none too so-



ciable, was scrupulously fair. Men of their opposing temperaments—Wilde was all Army, all regulations, and had no respect for civilian volunteers—would ordinarily have clashed. But these two had held themselves in. On the long trip from Aleppo neither had told the other, in so many words, what he thought of him.

"Good morning."

"Morning, Doctor."

"Glad to see you're all jacked up. We'll get cracking."

McClelland did not attempt to conceal his dismay.

"Now? I've got a friend I want to look up."

"A friend—here?" Captain Wilde glanced at sprawled Kametchliye; and McClelland was forced to admit that the mild amazement was justified; but all the same McClelland did not like the tone. "Sorry. Orders were to get back as soon as I could. Besides, we're going to have a passenger—a member of the Spears Mission. Petrol all right? Tires?"

"Oh, we're all set, yes. But I—"

"Sorry. If you'd let me know earlier— Anyway, here she comes."

Then Ward McClelland turned and saw Catherine.

She made an extraordinary trim figure, in her immaculate costume, against the smudged drabness of the town. Her feet stepped carefully but with haste across dun-colored rubble; and her eyes were downcast.

Captain Wilde went to meet her. Escorting her back, he said:

"This is Mr. McClelland, Miss Hardesty. He's a member of—"

She looked up, and said "Oh!"

McClelland nodded rather grimly.

"Didn't expect to meet me here, eh?"

She found a nice smile.

"You wouldn't expect to meet anybody here," she pointed out; and Captain Wilde politely guffawed.

"Already know one another, eh?" said Captain Wilde.

Service Man



"I never even had a chance to get to the doorway, before you'd turned on that officer, and made him take you away."

"Yes. . . . I got the shock of my life when I saw you come into that café last night. Of all the dives—"

"Oh, you were there?" She frowned a little. "Well, you didn't see me stay long, did you?"

"I certainly didn't! I never even had a chance to get over to the doorway before you'd turned on that officer who brought you, and bawled him out, and made him take you away."

She said sweetly to Captain Wilde: "It was Major Sennis. He'd had a few drinks, but even so I think he should have had better sense than to take me to a place like that."

"Oh, quite!" exclaimed the M.O.

He glanced from one to the other—puzzled, annoyed too; for he knew that there was some secret between them, and he resented this, having great respect for the trim Miss Hardesty, and none at all for that offhand ambulance driver, McClelland. Miss Hardesty, in the M.O.'s reasoning, was a nursing sister and therefore, practically an officer, whereas McClelland was nothing more than a driver, as far as he was concerned.

"Well—" He touched his mustache with his thumbnail. "Shall we be off? Want to make Deir-ez-Zor to-night, and I don't like the looks of those clouds. They say that when it does rain here it's terrific."

He took one of the folding benches in back, this being the least he could do as an officer and gentleman, offering to Catherine Hardesty the leather seat next to McClelland.

As McClelland started to warm the engine, he leaned forward to shout:

"See here, better go along the border instead of straight to Hassechliye. As far as that Wog village. I understand the track's harder up that way."

McClelland toned the engine down. He was troubled. They would not be on a proper road anyway, only on a desert track; but all reports were to the effect that the farther you were from the border the safer you were. Some of the Bedouins in those parts were by no means tamed, he had heard; the French had had twenty revolts in the twenty years of occupation since the First World War, and there was nothing to indicate that the troublemakers were tired. There were stories about what happened to soldiers who fell into the hands of some of those tribesmen, how their corpses looked when these were found.

McClelland called: "Think it's safe?"

There was a distinct snort.

"Not frightened by those absurd stories, are you? Might have been true when the French were in charge. Stories about what they used to do with their knives. . . . But that's past; they wouldn't dare harm a British Army man."

McClelland shrugged. Catherine said nothing, and indeed did not even appear to be listening.

"I've got my pistol," Wilde added.

"You've got one too, haven't you?"

"There's a revolver in the glove compartment."



"Didn't expect to meet me here, eh?"
 "You wouldn't expect to meet anybody here," she pointed out.

"Well? They wouldn't dare touch us. Oh, take the northern track, by all means!"

McClelland shrugged again and started the car. Outside the town, on the edge of the desert, he bore a bit to the right, taking the ill-defined track that for a little while was to parallel the hills of Turkey.

He did not know then, and couldn't have guessed, how much the decision was to mean in the lives of all three of them. He was thinking only of Catherine.

They had met in Aleppo six weeks before, and this fact never failed to astound him, who from the beginning felt that he had known this English girl all his life. He was not a man given to infatuations, but he had fallen in love with Catherine Hardesty with a promptness and thoroughness that seemed scarcely human. Nor did he try to hide this fact from himself, or from her. A forthright person, he had told her how he felt, with an earnestness that impressed and greatly troubled her.

"But at a time like this—"

"What's the war got to do with it?" McClelland had asked.

She had shaken her head. She took her part in the war, and the war itself, very seriously. It was, she said, no time to think of personal matters.

"We could see a good deal of one another, here. There's not much work at the hospital, and unless there's an invasion through here— After all, you don't *have* to get transferred. They'd be glad to have you stay in Aleppo," she argued.

"You're trying to keep me out of the real scrap! You, who think the war's so important!"

"No, no! I was only suggesting—I know you really want to go to Libya. That's what you crossed for."

McClelland had nodded glumly.

"I'd have joined the Army if I'd known Pearl Harbor was coming."

"I know that, dear."

THEY went about, enjoying Aleppo's scant entertainment—movies, the Hotel Barron, visits to the Citadel and the *souks* and some of the mosques. There was nothing coy about Catherine Hardesty. Flattered by the intensity of his love, she wanted to be kind. She was not saying definitely no, in any case. But again and again she came back to her original stand: at a time like this—

They had not seen one another for five days. There'd been no quarrel. But now there was strain between them, as they sat together in the ambulance.

The low blue clouds had slunk back of the hills, mumbling ominously but postponing attack. The desert lay flat and chill, though washed with sunlight. It was not duned thereabouts, but straight, littered with shards, and containing practically no vegetation—here and there a wan struggling clump of camel thorn, nothing more. There had been no rain in eight months. McClelland glanced back several times; the dust they left was stupendous, blotting the track for miles.

It was not easy to follow the track, a minor caravan route now little used.

A negligent wind shifted sand and dust over it.

"Well, my transfer's coming through all right," he said abruptly. "When we get back to Aleppo it'll be just a matter of days."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" She was instantly confused. "That is, I'm glad for your sake, Ward! You know I'll miss you. It's been terrible, just the past few days, without you. That's one reason why I jumped at the chance to come out here on a survey. I thought you'd gone already. I—I was hurt."

"Hell of a place."

"Isn't it, though!"

If he had ever questioned his love of this girl, the doubt had been blown away the previous night. It had been his only night in Kametchliye, which offers few charms to the sight-seer. There is no hotel in Kametchliye, and even if there had been, Captain Wilde and McClelland would have preferred the clean safe ambulance parked outside the town. The nearest movie house is perhaps at Mosul, more than a hundred miles to the south. There are two cafés, one with a radio set, one with a native orchestra—this latter being the town's hot spot, the gathering-place for Kametchliye's blades and criminals; and it was there that McClelland had been sitting, sipping wine, when Catherine entered.

A viler joint it would be hard to imagine. The cabaret, which had no name, was low-ceilinged; its band was loud and persistent, its dancers fat. Except for the dancers, who performed chiefly in strings of beads, giving a poor imitation of an old-fash-

ioned American vaudeville cancan, women were not to be seen in this dump; for the Kametchliyeans, though possibly not the strictest of Mohammedans, still kept their women at home.

The wine had been bad—strong, sour stuff; but whisky had been unobtainable, and beer was much too expensive. The atmosphere had been glutinous, the conversation polyglot. Very little of the Ninth Army touched this far town, yet there had been no lack of uniforms. There were native Syrian gendarmes, serving now under General Catroux; flip, eye-flashy members of the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force, brought in by the British for desert-control work, and decked magnificently in black and scarlet shakoes, scarlet bandoliers, scarlet sashes; elaborately mustachioed Turkish customs guards, for Kametchliye is literally astride the Turkish-Syrian boundary; even an occasional Iraqi, or a Persian, glum and alone, as McClelland had been. The local sports—Syrians, Turks, Armenians, and Jews—who for the most part made their living directly or indirectly out of smuggling, were slick and sleek (or thought they were) in too-smooth Western clothes, though most of them wore the familiar scarlet *tarboosh* rakishly aslant. Even commoner were the men of the desert, dark-eyed Bedouins who had come to this town—the only one they knew—for the purpose of seeing its wonders and spending the money that new rackets along the frontier had suddenly showered upon them. White-robed, the black bands of their *kafirs* askew and getting more askew as the arrack they drank took effect, they sat uneasily in unaccustomed chairs, and each clung jealously to his rifle. They smoked bubble pipes, filling the thick air with thicker smoke; small dark boys scampered here and there with braziers and small tongs to keep these loaded with coals.

LOOKING around, McClelland had reflected that he was probably the only man in the place who carried neither gun nor knife; most of them carried both—many a sash contained two or three bright weapons. The desert men, puffing at their bubble pipes, their eyes gleaming, their beards dusty, leered with enthusiasm at the dancing girls.

It had all seemed overdone. A few months earlier McClelland would have been thrilled by a scene which however dirty was undeniably colorful. But a few months before he had not been in love. In the café, he had not been tired enough to go to bed; and this was why he'd ordered wine.

When the street door had been opened and Catherine Hardesty came in, it was like a vision from heaven.

This thought crossed McClelland's mind; and if trite it was accurate. He'd been stunned. Rising, he had gaped.

She had not seen him. Stopping just inside the door, blocking her escort's entrance, like McClelland she had been stunned—but for a different reason. A hundred pairs of eyes—dark eyes, sharp, cruel, outspokenly lascivious, had been turned instantly upon her; and the impact of them had been like a physical blow. She had halted, while color climbed to the roots of her lovely soft brown hair. Then, before McClelland could get to her, or even call out, she had turned swiftly and urgently, fairly pushing out the red-faced Major who had brought her; and the door was slammed behind them.

McClelland had paid for his wine, only half finished, and hurried out; but in the night's blackness—Kametchliye does not go in for street lighting—he had not been able to find them. Sick at heart, he had wandered back to the ambulance, paid off the native he and Captain Wilde had hired to guard it, and made up his blankets. It had been a long while before he could sleep.

Why had just that one sight of her so powerfully affected him? He did not know. All he knew was that living, from now on, wasn't going to be any fun.

"I stayed the night with a Syrian family, friends of the Mission, very nice people," she said suddenly now, as though she'd read his thoughts.

"Yes. . . . I figured that."

"I—I really am glad, for your sake, about the transfer. And I really mean it that I'll miss you terribly."

"Why don't you marry me, then?"

She smiled quietly. He was glancing at her, and seeing this, he grunted. She reached out and touched one of his hands.

"You won't be satisfied with anything less, will you?"

"No," he said, and his voice was flat. "No, I won't be satisfied with anything less. I'm one of these everything-or-nothing guys."

"Ward, listen—"

Captain C. E. V. Wilde, R.A.M.C., had not been too pleased with all this. He couldn't hear a word of it, but he could see their lips move. They had talked in little over a conversational tone, which was still too quiet for him. He could have made himself heard only by shouting, as he did now.

"See here, sorry to interrupt and all that, but there's a frightful bumping—"

McClelland's head went up. He nodded slowly.

"Hell!" he muttered. "A flat!"

Playfully, after stopping the car, he poked Catherine's knee.

"Come on, come on! Get out! You won't have to do the work!"

She said, "You'll just change it, won't you?"

"Yes. This is bad country, from what they tell us. I wish they'd give us some decent rubber. My spare's practically paper. Now in Libya—"

"Yes, yes. In Libya they have good tires."

"Darn' tootin' they do!" The two were climbing out, ignoring Captain Wilde completely. "They have some real rubber there!"

WHEN the Captain got out he saw McClelland looking around the desert, and shaking his head.

"That blob of dust over there is coming this way. It could be a lorry," concluded McClelland, "or it could be guys on horseback."

"Afraid I don't quite understand."

"My point is, should I change tires or should I repair the tire? The spare's pretty terrible. It might take us as far as Hassachliye, or it might not. Anyway it would take us a few miles from here."

Captain Wilde looked at the cloud of dust. He did not affix a monocle, but he might as well have done so. He said quietly: "Are you frightened?"

McClelland didn't even shrug. He simply said: "I repair the tire, then?"

"Of course."

Catherine said sharply: "Have you forgotten I'm here?"

"I haven't," said McClelland.

There was a considerable silence. The cloud of dust grew larger. But Syria lay dead, flat, unmoving. There wasn't even a breath of wind.

Captain Wilde touched his mustache with his thumbnail.

"Certainly," he said. "Why, of course! Whatever made you think of anything else? Repair the tire, by all means."

McClelland went to the ambulance and started to yank tools out of the tool-case. Catherine said, "Of course nobody pays any attention to me," and going around to the shady side of the ambulance, sat down on the running-board. Captain Wilde said "H-m-m-m," letting it go at that.

You never know about a flat—ten minutes, half an hour, two hours, or three. Ward McClelland went to work with vigor and without hesitation; but it was a nasty hole and called for a lot of patching. Very soon he was filmed with sweat.

From time to time, without lifting his head, he glanced back over the track. He knew now that this wasn't a lorry coming. It was horsemen.

For a little while outside of Kametchliye they had passed scattered groups of natives with asses or camels, but they'd seen no trucks or caravans. On the border, just before the track

bore left down toward the better track that led direct from Kametchliye to Hassechliye, they had passed through a cluster of huts, where flea-bitten dogs and naked children and dirty-bearded white-robed men (but of course no women whom they could see) had stared apathetically. This was all. For half an hour afterward they had seen nothing except the blurred track itself—nothing that would indicate that man or beast ever had inhabited or visited this part of the world. The stillness, the thin sunlight, the vast distances of the wasteland, made the coming of horsemen seem the more curious.

They came fast, seven or eight of them, and reined to a striking jingling stop. At first glance they were no different from the desert men who had sat drinking arrack and watching the muscle-dancers in Kametchliye's nightclub—bearded men, bright-eyed, scowling, clad in loose flowing, dirty white *khajtans*, with rifles across their backs, and sashes stuck with pistols and knives. But the horses they rode were good ones, true Arabs, and the riders sat well in saddle; McClelland saw at closer inspection that their eyes were bright with scorn.

They paid no attention to him, and glanced only once, with swiftly suppressed astonishment, at Catherine Hardesty. Their leader, facing Captain Wilde, said something in a tongue none of them understood. Yet his meaning was clear. He motioned back the way he had come. His manner was that of a man who commands, expecting no disagreement.

Captain Wilde stared at him a moment in contempt, then turned away.

"Almost finished with that job, are you, McClelland?"

"Just about."

The Bedouin leader spoke again, sharper and louder, and when they looked up, startled by the urgency of his tone, they saw that he had unslung his rifle. His companions had done the same.

Captain Wilde cried, "Why, the damned—" And he started forward, reaching for his revolver.

"Take it easy!" snapped McClelland, grabbing his arm.

The Captain whirled.

"Are you telling me what to do?"

"I'm telling you what *not* to do! Have you forgotten Miss Hardesty?"

These two never had liked one another; but they couldn't fight now.

The Captain said in a low choked voice: "Take your hand off my arm."

McClelland removed the hand; but he did not turn away, and he didn't lower his gaze.

After a moment the Captain said quietly: "All right. I *had* forgotten Miss Hardesty, yes. I apologize to her. But what are we going to do?"

"Go with them, I suppose. Those are real guns. Mausers."

"But damn it! We *can't* go with them!"

"I don't see how we can do anything else. There must be some mistake. Try talking to them. You know Arabic better than I do."

Captain Wilde did not know it very well. Nor did anger help him to remember. He stood a little, windmilling his arms, trying in vain to keep his voice low; but in reality he shrieked with rage.

"Y'Allah! Ighrey! Waraah! 'Itla' barya! Understand? I said y'Allah!"

There was more like this, but it had no effect upon the Bedouins, who stared, unblinking. Watching them, McClelland doubted whether they understood more than a word here and there; and admittedly the Captain's Arabic was sketchy and to the highest degree informal. In any event the Bedouins gave no answer. The leader heard the tirade through—or at least continued to stare expressionless into the Captain's face—and then merely repeated his speech of command, repeating too his clear gesture: They should follow him.

CAPTAIN WILDE was speechless. Catherine Hardesty came close to McClelland; though she watched the Bedouin leader, she spoke to McClelland in a whisper:

"I'm frightened. I really am."

"Who isn't?" he asked cheerfully.

"Well, let's get inside, anyway."

But when they started for the ambulance the leader spoke sharply:

"Wakkef!"

They stopped.

The horsemen, moving almost imperceptibly, had made a square, and it was to this that the leader pointed. The horsemen had turned or were turning. Evidently it was intended that Catherine, Wilde, and McClelland should go on foot.

They walked to the center of the square. Captain Wilde, glowering at the ground, followed them. They started to move away from the ambulance.

They had gone no more than a few yards when Captain Wilde determinedly stopped.

"I'm damned if I will!"

His was a true fury. His face was purple; his eyes were almost closed; rage caused his lips to tremble.

"See here: You two go on, if you wish, but I'm going back; I don't intend to permit them to order a British Army officer around."

"They might shoot you!" Catherine cried.

"Let 'em, if they dare!" He meant this. He was not showing off. "I'm going back. If they really mean business, then they *will* shoot me!"

He turned without hesitancy and strode between two of the horses back toward the ambulance. McClelland and Catherine stopped, turned, stared fascinatedly after him. One of the horsemen had spoken sharply, but had not put out a hand to detain the Captain. Now the leader shouted twice—loudly, firmly:

"Wakkef! Wakkef!"

Wilde must have heard. Even his rage could not have stopped his ears. He heard; but he did not pause.

The Mausers were unslung in one swift motion, and the bolts clicked in unison. Crack guardsmen could not have done a better job. Catherine tried to scream, but only a thin wheezing sound came from her throat. Captain Wilde's back showed no twitch, his head didn't turn; nor did his step falter.

Then they fired. The whole splatter of shots was almost like one shot, like the cracking of a single whip, it was so sharp and brief. Every one of the bullets must have struck Captain Wilde, who had not been twenty feet from the farthest Bedouin. He sprang forward through the air, precisely as though he had been kicked between the shoulder-blades. He probably never knew what struck him, never heard the shots. . . . He was slammed against the back of the ambulance, and he caromed off as though struck by some fist in the face. He turned completely around, facing them for a terrible instant with unseeing eyes; and then he fell all at once, fell forward, like some mechanical thing with cut wires.

He turned a little as he fell, and Catherine Hardesty saw his back. That was when she fainted. . . .

Though their horses were excellent and their manner arrogant, there was nothing rich about the apparel of these Bedouins; nor did their camp—which was unexpectedly close at hand—present at first any novelty. The camp was of the sort often seen in that part of the world. It consisted of a formless scattering of low, stiff black tents with very long ropes to hold these down in the wind that so frequently blows across the desert. The tents were made of sun-cured camel hide, which looks like coarse black felt.

Women were in evidence here, besides the usual mongrel dogs and the children. The women were not veiled. Their foreheads were carefully covered—every Moslem woman of whatever sect takes care to keep at least her forehead covered—and the cheeks of these ugly women, all of whom looked old but fierce, were copiously tattooed in horizontal blue lines. They scowled at the newcomers. They looked as if they always scowled, as if they had never learned to smile.

The women were particularly interested in Catherine. She walked erectly, leaning only a little on McClelland's arm, and looking neither to right nor left. Her swoon had been brief; and since her recovery after he had dashed precious water on her face, she had said little. She had walked the distance to the camp, perhaps three miles, without a word.

THEY came upon the camp abruptly. It nestled in a little hollow and could not be seen for more than a few hundred feet away, so low were the tents. It was clean, if dreary.

The Sheik's tent, however, was a jolt. When first they entered it, stooping, they saw nothing unusual, but stood a minute or so, blinking, while their eyes grew used to the darkness. Then they began to perceive something gleaming here, something dully aglitter there. Gradually they came to realize that they were in a place of some grandeur—shabby grandeur, yes, and dusty, but pretentious.

Men were talking, the men who had brought them in. They addressed the Sheik himself, who for some time, coughing in the acrid air, Catherine and McClelland did not see. When they did see the Sheik they blinked again.

He was resplendent in a somewhat pitiful way. He was a huge man, though he seemed recently to have shrunk: his face was shrunken, his great hulking chest and shoulders drooped. He sat in a throne-like chair of dark wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the most pretentious thing in the tent. He smoked a cigarette, and looked fixedly at them.

Yet he did not seem to see them, though he was no more than a few feet away. He was not only old—his face seamed with a million wrinkles, his beard scanty; but he appeared apathetic and perhaps not even wholly conscious. His hunched attitude carried out this suggestion.

He had a face curiously white, almost chalky, almost as if you could have puffed with your lips and blown portions of it away. His beard was grayish-white. His glazed, rheumy eyes held no expression and were of no definite color. Indeed, except when he raised a hand to his lips to move or remove the cigarette, he might have been a mummy only just disinterred and likely to collapse at the first faint movement of air.

The cigarette, however, was sufficiently powerful. It was the smoke from this which caused them to cough. The Sheik puffed it slowly, holding the smoke in his lungs as long as he was able to do so.

Otherwise, he glittered: His fingers, bony and very thin, were covered with rings. From his wrists dangled ban-

gles, and many gold and silver chains, hung around his neck. His *khafan*, like his burnoose, was perfectly white; but the sash twisted around his waist was made of heavy silk shot with half a dozen colors, and from under it peered the grips of many daggers and pistols—giddy weapons of ebony and Circassian walnut, mother-of-pearl, and damaskeened steel, weirdly carved and set with all manner of huge uncut jewels.

The man who did most of the talking ceased. The others had fallen silent some minutes earlier. There

"See here," said Captain Wilde. "I don't intend to permit them to order a British Army officer around."

was then no sound in the tent. The Sheik did not stir, and didn't seem interested.

McClelland cleared his throat.

"Do you speak English?"

When there was no answer to this, and not even anything to indicate that it had been heard, McClelland tried in a much louder voice:

"Parlez-vous français?"

Neither the Sheik nor anybody else in the tent so much as stirred. Ward McClelland scraped his memory for Arabic.

"Sabah el kheir, ya seedi. Sayida!" He swallowed. Nothing else happened. *"Keef haalak?"*

After a long time the Sheik, moving very slowly, took the cigarette out of his mouth. He held it with two crooked beringed fingers, at some distance, as though he found it distasteful, and then opened the fingers and let it drop. After that he folded his hands in his lap. The cigarette sent up an anxious but slackening spiral of bright blue smoke.

"I'm beginning to get discouraged," McClelland muttered.

He shouted: "Hey, cut this out! A man's just been murdered in cold blood and we want to know what it's all about! Speak up, Granddad!"

This had no more effect than the other tries. Nor had McClelland recognized a word of what the men who had captured them had reported so vociferously to the Sheik; though the words sounded somewhat like Arabic,



*Illustrated
by Raymond
Sisley*

presumably they could have been Armenian, Assyrian, Turkish, Greek, Kurdish, Turkamani, Iraqi, Persian, Tscherkese or any of the many dialects of these. Some of the desert tribes, for all McClelland knew, had tongues of their own. Anything was possible in this part of the world.

VERY soon again they were to hear that strange language. A man entered. Like the others, he was tall, bearded, arrogant. He brushed past them, so that they saw nothing of him but outline; but from the stir among the others, they gathered that here was a personage. He bowed formally though not notably low before the Sheik. In a low, self-assured voice he began rapidly to speak in that language the prisoners could not understand. He addressed only the Sheik himself, who listened without any answer or acknowledgment.

At long last, however, the Sheik nodded. This man, at least, had ac-

complished something! He muttered a response, and instantly turned.

"There's been a bit of a misunderstanding." He spoke in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, and with an impeccable Oxford accent. "Come over to my tent and I'll have a try at explaining, eh?"

Immediately he began to chuckle, and it was obvious that their expressions of amazement amused him. He was a large man, not merely tall but big all around—he must have weighed two hundred pounds; they saw when he turned to speak to them, and the light from the entrance fell upon his face, that he was no Bedouin. He had the beard; he wore the costume; but his mouth was small and full, his nose

have no contact with the formal enemy, are expected to keep in touch with all manner of potential malcontents in occupied territory. They are the men who make the acquaintance of native chiefs and sheiks and if possible the leaders of strange sects, learning out-of-the-way dialects, keeping the higher-ups in touch with what's going on among the less accessible of conquered people who perhaps are unaware of the fact that they have been conquered or unwilling to admit this

Désmoulins smiled, too blandly. "I have never had that privilege. But then, I'm not in the Army now. I have found—uh—a more congenial outlet for my abilities."

The American nodded slowly.

"I catch on. Special intelligence, huh?"

"Won't you come to my tent? They can't understand a word anyway, but I do, prefer privacy. You're both in

was almost a pug, and his round bright eyes were blue.

Catherine cried out impulsively: "Thank God!"

The man's reply was quick: "I wouldn't. You have very little to thank any god for, right now."

"But you—you're English!"

HE smiled. He had an assured but hardly reassuring smile. He liked himself. Moreover, he was no fool. He seemed to find the situation very entertaining.

"No. I'm French. However, I attended the university in England for some years before I went into the Army."

"But— Well, anyway, you're a gentleman!"

He bowed, wryly smiling.

"Jean Désmoulins, Madame, formerly a colonel in the Intelligence, and now more or less at your service. So sorry that we can't supply you with a genuine Britisher, but perhaps you are acquainted with Major Frazer, the political officer stationed at Deir-ez-Zor? We expect him here at any hour."

For the moment this seemed a sufficient explanation of Désmoulins' presence and even of his dress. He worked, of course, for the political officer. Political officers in the British Middle East Forces are in reality liaison officers—in-between men, the smoothers, the back-patters—who, though they

fact. The political officer lives a strange and often not unexciting life, attending fantastic feasts, offering curious toasts, from time to time engaging eccentric agents. He gets to remote places, where he must learn the ropes. In short he is a spreader of good will, which is also sometimes known as propaganda.

McClelland began to frown.

"You—you know the political officer at Dez?"

my custody now, more or less. Old Abou does just about anything I tell him. Come along."

So again they traversed that camp of black tents and walked through the barrage of disapproving or downright hating eyes. Nobody spoke or moved. The sunlight was very bright after the dimness of the tent, and a wind stirred the dust gently but threateningly.

They could not look out over the desert. Their vision was restricted to the hollow in which the camp lay. They could not even see whether storm-clouds still hovered over the hills of Turkey.

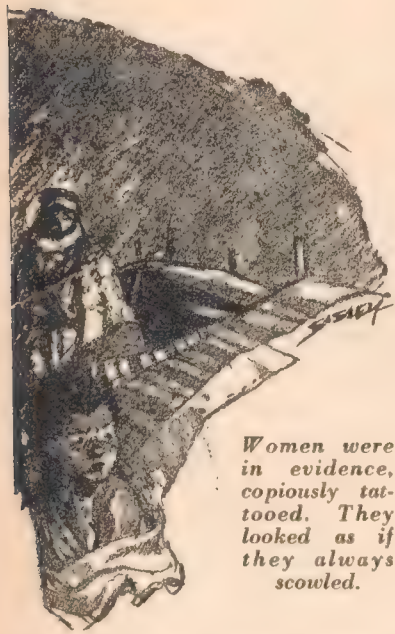
Désmoulins' tent, on the outskirts of the little camp, was exactly like the others. It was empty except for a couple of not impressive rugs: there was not even a taboret.

"Sorry the accommodations aren't more comfy. This is a highly Puri-



tanical tribe, and only the Old Man is permitted luxuries. *He* can do nothing wrong. It doesn't make any difference how he decks himself out. But the rest of us are different. I can't even offer you a cigarette. And I'd advise you," he added as McClelland, reminded, reached for a pocket, "not to smoke your own, either. They're hot-headed, these people."

McClelland blurted: "I'll say they're hot-headed! Do you know that a little while ago, just a few miles from here, they shot and killed a British M.O.?"



Women were in evidence, copiously tattooed. They looked as if they always scowled.

He had expected Désmoulins to be horrified, but the Frenchman only continued to look at him with that self-pleased, irritating, smug smile.

"Of course I know that," he replied. "It was a mistake, but it was a mistake they'll have to stick to. That's why I must warn you right here and now that you mustn't expect to get out of this place alive."

ALMOST at once he explained the tribe in which they found themselves, and its religious beliefs. He was chatty, voluble, and undoubtedly well-informed, but he was emotionless; it was as though he explained some curious phenomena, or told some traveler's tale, to a chance acquaintance at his club. He had the clubman's manner.

In Syria, he pointed out, theology is confusion; it's Babel. Among the organized religions officially acknowledged—and there were uncounted unofficial ones, mad dervish sects—were the Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Mel-

kites, Armenian Gregorian, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Assyro-Chaldean or Nestorian, Chaldean, Roman Catholic, and a tiny minority of enthusiastically divided Protestants. These, to be sure, were only the Christian divisions. The Mohammedans, greatly in the majority, were themselves divided into Omar Khayyam's two and seventy jarring sects—"and my word, how they *do* jar!" There were also Alawites, sometimes called Nazariahs, or Ansariyas; Yezidis, who believed that God had resigned the administration of the world to the Devil, a personage best placated; the Ismailis, once notorious as the Assassins, who murdered stealthily and repeatedly as a matter of religious principle; the Druzes, or Muwahiddins, who, believing in the imminent return of that once eminent madman Hakim, simply adored massacres; and of course, inevitably, the Jews.

"There are others," Désmoulins added airily, "but they slip my mind. This present outfit is difficult to classify. They're quite a collector's item, really. Not exactly Muwahiddin, not exactly Ismaili, though they subscribe to the more lamentable tenets of both. A simple-living people, and very blood-thirsty. If they even know that there is a British Ninth Army, they certainly stand in no awe of it. I was delighted when I discovered them, and even more delighted when I learned that they traditionally control this particular portion of the border. I made friends with them—first as part of my duty, and then, after the De Gaulle followers had joined the British to throw the Chief of State's government out of Syria, because I saw how I could use 'em. Now, when—"

McClelland interrupted.

"This is all very interesting, and I'm sure they'll listen to it very carefully in Vichy—if you ever get back. But the two of us happen to have just seen a murder committed. So would you mind returning to that remark you made a little while ago—that we might not get out alive?"

Désmoulins' eyes opened very wide.

"You misheard me. What I said was not that you *might* not get out alive, but that you certainly *wouldn't*!"

Conviction rang from the words. He spread his palms.

McClelland glanced at Catherine, who was gazing out through the entrance of the tent and might not have heard Désmoulins' words. Some of the horribly tattooed women, women who looked as though they had never been young, were standing near by; they glowered at this tent.

"Unpleasant matrons, aren't they?" Désmoulins chirruped. "Fact is, they're the ones who do the dirty work when

anybody is caught. They do it with knives. But the details of course are—"

"Why don't you shut up?" McClelland turned from him, and touched Catherine's arm. "Want to sit on the ground? My tunic—"

"No, that's all right, thanks." She swiveled her eyes toward him for the merest instant, and even smiled a bit. "You don't have to worry about me, Ward. I won't faint again."

WHIRLPOOLS of dust drifted past the entrance of the tent, and collapsed. A horseman cantered by. "If you were thinking of making a bolt for it, I'd advise you not to," Désmoulins said. "They all have horses, and guns."

"We'd observed those facts," McClelland said.

Catherine turned upon the Frenchman suddenly, fiercely, reaching out a hand so that, startled, he stepped back.

"See here, I don't care what your political affiliations are, but you must get us away! You *must*! You said a little while ago, that you could do anything with that Sheik."

"Did I? Then I was wrong. I can do *almost* anything, thanks to his fondness for hashish, which I fed to him in the first place. But I can't do just *anything*. Matter of fact, he dislikes and distrusts me very much. Still, I run the show here—in most respects. But I couldn't let you go."

McClelland asked: "Do you know Major Frazer?"

"The political officer at Deir-ez-Zor? No, I've never met him. What sort of chap is he?"

"A sportsman, big, good-natured, a Scotty, some Highland regiment—the Seaforth's, I think. Speaks perfect French."

"He'll have a lovely time with his French when he gets here."

"When do you expect him?"

"He's due any time now, to pay us a little call—get to know us and all that sort of thing—precisely as I used to do. I won't be around when he comes, naturally. . . . And neither will you. Those fair maidens will be out there, fingering their knives probably, and thinking about you. But they take a long while on the job, when they get a prisoner. It's quite an elaborate ritual. And they don't dare start it yet."

"Why do you say you won't be here when Major Frazer comes?"

"I don't want him to see me," Désmoulins answered simply.

"Oh! Even he doesn't know about this special work you're doing, eh?"

"Well, no. No, he doesn't know about this—special work. He might know about the smuggling. I fancy he does, and that he plans to keep his

eye open for anything worth telling the F.S.S. boys. But he won't see anything. Nothing is stored here; it merely passes through. We see it well into Turkey, for which service we get a thumping big fee, which our beloved chief tries to appropriate for himself. I'm the assistant Sheik, as you might put it. I'm *Pooh Bah*. I'm interpreter and liaison officer and business manager and bookkeeper all rolled into one. A cushy berth, my friends."

"I don't quite get it."

"No, it would seem that you don't, Yankee. You *are* a Yankee, aren't you? Well, wheat goes out. The British Army says that wheat must stay in Syria, where a lot of the natives starve. But it fetches higher prices elsewhere."

"I know that. It's about as dirty a trick as any smuggler ever played."

"Do you think so? Well, *chacun à son gout*. At any rate, that's the way it goes. Camel-load after camel-load of it. The heads of the smuggling syndicate do not have such a high moral sense as I find in you. But they do have cash. And this tribe comes in handy as a guard, being in a geographically strategic spot. They see that there is no interference from stray Desert Patrol units, or F.S.S. operatives, or, even more important, from— What is it you call them in the States? Hijackers? You see, I too once went to the cinema."

"What do they bring back?"

"All sorts of things. German manufactured products, mostly—binoculars, cameras, and a lot of hashish. I like to be sure that our dear Sheik gets all he craves. It's practically all he does get—that and a few gaudy gimcracks now and then. I get the cash, at least most of it, and I've got plenty of it salted away."

"All right, you're clever! Meanwhile Miss Hardesty and I have something else to think about. As she said, you *must* get us out of this!"

"My dear Yankee, I couldn't do that if I wanted to, and wouldn't want to if I could!"

While they stared in consternation, he blandly enlarged: "Why should I spoil my beautiful racket? This murder was done without my orders, without the Sheik's orders. They thought he was Major Frazer, and they resented it when he wouldn't follow them. A hasty, violent people. It's got to come out sometime, I suppose. Though I'll promise this, that when those women are through with their work, there won't be any *corpus delicti* worth mentioning."

"Cut it out!" snarled McClelland. "Try to remember that—"

"Never mind, Ward. His melodramatics don't bother me. But I still can't see why if he's in Intelligence, if he's a colonel—"

"Madame, I never said that I was on a special Intelligence mission. Your Yankee friend here jumped to that conclusion, possibly because of what you call my melodramatics. Nor"—he wagged a forefinger—"did I say that I am a colonel. What I did say was that I *was* a colonel, and that I'd resigned." He smiled again, sure of himself, and unwilling to let them see that his vanity had been hurt. "It's a euphemism, of course. One doesn't resign a commission in wartime, does one? What I did was desert."

THE ruins might have been Assyrian, Hittite, Persian, Greek or Turkish; or perhaps some stray contingent of Crusaders had left them. They were too far north to be Egyptian ruins, too far from the sea to mark a Phœnician outpost. It didn't matter. A land with as varied a history as Syria—which gave Isadorus and Apollodorus to the world, not to mention St. Simeon Stylites and the unspeakable Heliogabalus—which has been overrun by, and in time has absorbed, more peoples than anybody cares to count—in such a land ruins are not novelties. Unless they chance to be massive or notably lovely—Baalbek, Palmyra, Sidon, Meskene, Krak des Chevaliers—it is unlikely that they will even be mentioned, even recorded, except in the notebooks one assumes archeologists keep. In Syria the traveler literally stumbles over ruins; for the desert, which seems static, is in fact always busy, even today; and wind and erosion, given centuries in which to work, are powerful burying agents.

So it was with the ruins to which the garrulous Désmoulins conducted them. These ruins were a low-lying cluster of half-filled-in chambers from a bygone age, without any tower or distinctive mark, in most places level with the desert, from which they were all but indistinguishable. They were only about a mile from the camp.

This was no sight-seeing trip; Désmoulins, as before, was talkative and flippant, discoursing upon the convenience of having a submerged civilization so close at hand and so well concealed; but though his manner was that of a genial if somewhat impertinent guide, Catherine and McClelland knew that they were being conducted not to a "point of interest" but to a jail.

They had visited the Sheik first; and Désmoulins, technically deferential, though in fact his manner was insolent as always, had talked in a rapid, low, urgent voice. It was not unlike the previous audience. The Sheik, sitting alone amid his dusty grandeur, remained, as before, alike motionless and expressionless. After a long time, and very briefly, he nodded. The thing was done. Dés-

moulins had won his point; and after another somewhat mocking obeisance, he turned again upon the captives.

"Behold the man from Cook's! Shall we shove off?"

Nevertheless, when they thought it over, they believed that there had been some points of difference from the previous audience; or rather, that this time they had noticed something. The Sheik was a mummy, yes. He was aged, weak, perhaps crippled, and certainly a puppet, whose ordinary intelligence, no doubt slight enough in itself, was kept doped by hashish skillfully and persistently supplied. All the same, they agreed that they had perceived in the eyes of the Sheik, this time, a faint but unmistakable glint of hatred. The emotion suited him, to be sure, as the heat of his people; for it was clear that these particular Bedouins subsisted on hatred, scorning every other thing. But it had not been hatred of themselves that the visitors noted—it had been hatred of the too-smooth Jean Désmoulins.

The Sheik distrusted him. Désmoulins himself indeed had said as much; and now they had confirmed this by the evidence of their eyes. The Sheik, like every other man in the place—this too was evident as they walked through the camp, Désmoulins talking largely and liquidly, and waving his arms in guide-fashion—the Sheik, like the rest, was insanely jealous of his master. Who, after all, was this Frenchman? What if he *had* learned their language, adopted their religion, conformed in all things to their customs? He was an upstart, a nobody, an outsider. Afraid of him, they hated him. Granted that he was clever, what was cleverness in the desert? Granted that he made the arrangements by which men from the cities, small sly dark men, paid them great sums for a bit of easy work now and then—still, who got that money? The Sheik got it, or was supposed to. But did he?

The "Inscrutable East" is a phrase invented by Westerners who have not traveled there, or who, having done so, wish to make those travels pay. The thoughts and very feelings of the scowling men among whom Catherine and McClelland and their voluble conductor passed on their way out of camp (the women, as always, lurked in the background, their eyes small and bright, their hands hidden in the folds of their robes) were as patent as anything in this world could be.

Désmoulins, being used to them, ignored them. McClelland and the Spears Mission nurse watched them with interest.

"I wish I could slip a few words of some language he'd understand into the ear of old King Tut back there," McClelland whispered once. "—A few

of the things this movie villain's told us."

"I think he knows them anyway," she whispered back. "The only question is—where?"

"Yes. And if they polish him off, they may never find out."

Nobody followed them out of camp, but at no time did they think of breaking into a run. The desert was blank and brown, as always. It was about noon now. The sunlight, though full, was not warm. Except for idle small whirlpools kicked up erratically by the wind, there was no dust in the air. The clouds, still uncertain of themselves, still reluctant to jettison their plan for a raid, were a whiff nearer, lower too.

But the two paid no heed to the clouds. Swiftly and with anxious eyes they scanned the horizon. It told them nothing.

DÉSMOULINS too scanned the horizon; they detected for the first time a slight air of uneasiness about him. The impending visit of the political officer from Deir-ez-Zor was not making him happy.

"I won't be here much longer," he said, rather defensively, as though he had read their thoughts. "Major Frazer should be feasted—on a lump of cold camel-meat—at some time this afternoon. I hope that he won't be detained. I don't think he will. I think I've got that much into their heads! Tonight, late, there's going to be a big movement of goods through here—the biggest yet. Tomorrow morning the matter of you comes up. It will take some time, and will involve quite a celebration. That's the only occasion on which these charming pupils of mine really let themselves out, when they have somebody to discomfort. Ladies' Day, you might call it. I'll get away then sometime. I'll get away and be rich. *mes infants!*"

McClelland asked: "Where'll you go?"

"None of your damn' business," Désmoulins replied cheerfully. "But I'll get there, and with plenty of money to spend. I have it all arranged. I am no fool."

"People like Miss Hardesty and Captain Wilde—"

"*Parfaitement!* That's why I'm clearing out! Oh, of course there'll be a search! But it won't start for several days yet. After all, you might have had engine trouble, you might have been held up in Hassechliye for some reason. . . . Well, anyway, here we are."

At first it looked no different from any other part of the desert, except that you might suppose that some idiot had tried to plow there. The earth was ruffled, that's all.

After a while you perceived holes—small irregular rabbitry apertures which enlarged swiftly as the edges crumbled when you kicked them. Some of the holes were bigger than others. A few would have admitted men; and some seemed to have done so. There'd been no formal digging, no shoring by timber—the hardest thing to get in that treeless world—no systematic excavation, but only the aimless poking and probing of passers and the occasional burrowing (for men will always look for treasure) of natives who in the past had hoped to find wealth in the scanty remains of this ancient town.

But there were no broken columns, no chimneys, or towers, or ramparts. There could never have been much loot. The wind had been stronger than any marauding band; and the desert in time obliterated everything but a few of the spaces that once had been surrounded by walls.

"Our own little Ur-of-the-Chaldees. Unexciting, but it has its uses. Some day I suppose somebody'll 'discover' it, and some university will send an expedition here, and all the local Wogs will get a lot of sieve work, and books will be written to tell the world that in Something-Something B.C. the What-do-y'-call-'ems of northeastern Syria stirred their coffee with spoons exactly the same as those we use today. . . . Follow me carefully, please, or you might find yourself descending like Alice into Wonderland."

When Ward McClelland saw the tracks, his heart gave a bound. He recognized them. He should—he had patched those pesky tires often enough! Nor had he forgotten the revolver in the ambulance's glove compartment.

He made no mention of the tracks to Catherine or to Désmoulins, though sometimes they were almost beneath their feet.

"*Entrez, monsieur, madame!* Once the Governor's palace, I presume."

The tracks went right down into it. It was by far the largest opening they had seen, a fair-sized doorway, and the earth slanted into it like a steep drive. There were some shapeless bricks around the edges of this doorway, but these were nearly merged with the earth they so closely resembled in texture: they were the same shade of yellowish brown.

"You've noticed that the ambulance was driven in here," Désmoulins remarked. "You've been eying those tracks, haven't you?"

McClelland shrugged.

"A guy gets sort of attached to a crate he's driven so far."

Désmoulins chuckled.

"It and you are prisoners together. But it will survive you. I drove it here, and soon it will carry me away."

He gazed again around the horizon, frowning a little in the sunlight. He stared for some time at the far thunderheads.

"If they ever come over," he muttered, half to himself, "we'd have to shift camp in a hurry; that hollow would be a lake in no time. When it does rain here— Oh, well. Shall we go below?"

McClelland faced him, ignoring the arm movement which suggested that they descend into the cave.

"Let's get this thing straight. You're afraid to release us because of Wilde's death; it would break up your racket. All right. You've told us several times that you're soon going to clear out anyway, with a lot of money, to some place where you can join up with your Vichy pals."

"Shouldn't we—"

"Now, wait a minute! Suppose we make you an offer? Suppose we give our word of honor that we won't say what's happened for two whole days after we get back? What do you say to that?"

Désmoulins only smiled.

"I would say, 'Certainly not,' of course."

"What's the matter. Don't you think our word is good?"

"It isn't that. How could you get away?"

"The ambulance is in there!"

"And you'd be seen driving away, and then what would happen to Colonel Jean Désmoulins? Do you suppose I'd enjoy that knife ceremony on my own live body? Do you suppose they wouldn't love to give it to me?"

McClelland's answer was prompt. He had glanced back toward the camp and saw that three tribesmen, their robes flutter in the wind, were walking toward the ruins.

"Come with us!"

"Don't be ridiculous! Why, if some of the men close to General Catroux—"

"You say you have cash and you know a perfect hideaway? All right. We'll take you to Hassechliye, or back to Kamechliye, or for that matter anywhere you want—and we won't open our mouths about it for two whole days afterward!"

HE looked at Catherine. Wetting her lips, she nodded. She was willing to agree to this arrangement.

But the renegade Frenchman continued to smile. His round, slightly protuberant blue eyes gleamed with amusement. He resembled a big business man whose ten-year-old nephew tries to tell him how a corporation should be run.

"You still overlooked several important facts, monsieur."

"Such as?"

"One: Major Frazer is due here any minute now, and if he finds the camp



"I can shoot straight enough if I need to, monsieur," said Désmoulins.

in a turmoil, he'll do some investigating. Two: More than two hundred and forty camel-loads of wheat are to be escorted over the frontier near here tonight, and I as usual will handle the funds—thereby topping my ill-gotten gains with the prettiest prize yet. And there's still another fact—

He was staring at Catherine now, and though there was no desire in his face, it held a coldness of purpose that made her shrink.

"I never said that the women of this interesting tribe would perform their somewhat messy rites upon *both* of you. They'd like that, no doubt. But a woman has a certain value here—any

woman. Oh, the men are moral enough, marvelously moral! Not one would dream of touching a woman who wasn't his legally married wife. But once she *is*— And they have their own marriage ceremonies, of course. They have no regard for the civil authorities, for banns and licenses and all that.

"The man who arranges the marriage, by their own law, gets a very pretty fee," Désmoulins went on in a low significant whisper. "And because I alone know English here, I alone can be the go-between. You see? The lady's consent is not necessary—it's assumed. Oh, I know what you're thinking, mademoiselle! You'd resist, you'd escape? Ah, you don't know how a Bedouin guards his womenfolk! You'll get no chance to escape—though you might, later on, if

you are in luck, get a chance to kill yourself."

He spread his palms, turning to McClelland.

"You see? A final bit of change, which I have no thought of leaving. It can be arranged tomorrow."

McClelland found himself moving toward the man.

"If I thought you meant that—"

Catherine cried: "Ward! Please!"

Désmoulins' hands were beneath his *khafan*. He smiled still, but his eyes were watchful.

"You know of course that I am armed?"

"I don't give a damn whether you've got a cannon! If I really thought you meant that— But you don't! You've gone ga-ga from lonesomeness, and you're a guy who always did like to hear himself talk, and now you're putting on an act. If I really thought—"

"Think what you please," Désmoulins interrupted. "Just now, let us go under the earth. Remember, we can sit in the ambulance."

The ambulance! The revolver!

McClelland turned away, growling. Out of a corner of an eye, he noted that the three tribesmen were still slowly approaching this spot.

"All right, let's go," he agreed.

DÉSMOULINS went first, slowly but with confidence; he called over a shoulder that they should not fear holes or pitfalls here, that the floor was firm. They saw him as a white blur. Presently, beside this blur, loomed the desert-yellow blur of the ambulance. A good car—an American job! McClelland grinned a little, and squeezed Catherine's hand.

"I'm sure he's been talking through his hat," he whispered.

But he was not sure of this. Désmoulins, he feared, meant what he said. A *poseur*, yes; but not a fool. That Désmoulins so freely had told them of his desertion, his Axis sympathies, his smuggling—this was im-

portant. The man certainly never expected them to get out alive.

As for that stuff about Catherine—Ward McClelland, when he thought of that, felt his jaw get so tight that it hurt. His face went cold with sweat, though the cave, far from being damp or chilly, was unexpectedly warm.

"You said something, monsieur?"

"I was just saying that she's a good old ambulance."

HE ran a hand along the hood as he spoke, making for the door, next to which Désmoulins stood. The glove compartment was on this side.

"Your devotion to your vehicle does you credit. They're all given by rich people in the States, *n'est-ce pas*? Most commendable!" The voice was muffled in the darkness. "You're looking for something inside there, monsieur?"

"Uh—what?" said McClelland, whose hand had found the compartment.

The metal door snapped down under pressure, and he prayed that it wouldn't squeak as sometimes it did, so that Désmoulins, hearing, would guess his purpose. Désmoulins could not possibly see his hand.

The revolver was there! It was cold and hard against his fingers.

"I said: 'Are you looking for something?'"

McClelland swiveled on a heel. The hammer clicked officiously as he drew it back with his thumb. He jammed the muzzle into the soft white figure at his side.

"Yes, and I found it! And unless you get us out, it goes off! That clear?"

The answer was silence which seemed to last an hour, during which nothing moved. Then there came a low, juicy chuckle. McClelland, tense, felt the barrel of the gun shudder as the deserter's ample belly shook.

"I think you must be mad," he whispered after a while.

"I think *you* must be, monsieur; it you suppose I'd drive your ambulance in here and not search it. Of course I knew that revolver was there! And of course I took the cartridges out!"

Again there was silence. McClelland flicked his eyes toward the entrance of the cave. The three tribesmen had not yet appeared.

He whispered: "I hope, for your sake, that you mean that—"

"Of course I mean it!"

"—Because I'm going to pull this trigger."

"By all means, pull it!"

McClelland did. The hammer fell with a shattering clack, but there was no other sound. He pulled the trigger again, and again. Time after time the hammer rose and fell, until the chamber had made a complete revolution.

"Satisfied?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I'm very pleased. Because I've got something better here for you—"

He dropped the gun and swung with his right fist, and he followed this with his left. He couldn't see the man's face, but he swung for the place the voice had come from.

"Stop it! Stop it, I tell you!"

"Ward, don't! He'll kill you!" cried Catherine.

One fist felt collision with the bearded chin, and that was good. The left missed, however, and the force of that swing threw McClelland against Désmoulins. He grabbed an arm he sensed rather than saw. He twisted, ducking. And a gun went off.

It made a most prodigious explosion in that low-ceilinged close place. It seemed to McClelland, as to Catherine Hardesty, that the whole structure had blown up. For a little while everything but that mighty sound was eliminated from the earth.

Then, as the echoes skittered back and forth along ancient forgotten corridors, McClelland became conscious that he was leaning against the right forward mudguard. He didn't know whether or not he had been shot. He didn't feel any pain.

Catherine was beside him. She was crying, and asking him between sobs if he was all right, imploring him to speak. He thought he did speak, but she kept begging for his voice, so he cleared his throat and said in a louder tone, and rather sharply: "Sure, I'm all right."

"I thought he'd killed you! Darling, darling! Are you hurt at all?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Anyway, I don't feel anything. Is that what happens when you're wounded?"

Désmoulins' voice came coldly: "You should know, an ambulance-driver."

McClelland was not so much alarmed as confused, and not so much confused as sore. He stirred, pushed Catherine gently aside.

"So you can't even shoot straight at that distance? You must be nervous about something," he jeered.

"I can shoot straight enough if I need to, monsieur. You took me by surprise just now. I almost did kill you; next time I will. Stay away from me after this."

"Not at all, sweetheart! I'm coming into mess you up right now, Catherine, you stay over there. I'm—"

"Ward, you can't—"

"Can't I, though? You watch?"

"Stay back, monsieur, or by God, I'll—"

There was a considerable clamor at the entrance. The three tribesmen now were silhouetted there. They'd heard the shot, and were tremendously excited. They held their rifles at the alert.

Désmoulins shouted something to them, as McClelland paused.

They shouted something back.

Désmoulins said swiftly: "Stay back, for God's sake! Something's happened—I don't know just what. But they'll shoot us all if I don't get out there and straighten matters."

Surly, McClelland said: "Go ahead."

The pistol the Frenchman held vanished into the folds of his *khaftan*, and they saw his bulk in silhouette as he stalked majestically toward the entrance. He and the Bedouins jabbered for a while.

Catherine was whispering: "You're sure you're all right, dear? Did it burn you or anything? Don't I smell burned cloth?"

"I'm on fire, yes, darling, but not the way you mean." He slipped an arm about her shoulder, and found that it trembled. For that matter his arm trembled too. The very air of the cavern seemed still to shudder from the impact of that pistol-shot. "I—I'm sorry I lost my head like that, Catherine. Kid stuff, I'll admit. I just got so sore—"

"Ward, if you'd been killed, I—I don't know what I'd have done!"

"No," he said soberly. "I don't know, either, what you'd have done. That's why I must keep my temper, and *not* get killed. I won't go haywire like that again, I'll promise you. And we're going to get out. I don't know how, but I was never surer of anything in my life. Kiss me, Catherine."

Désmoulins' voice came, and it was syrupy with sarcasm.

"So that's the way it is, eh? Well, well! Very touching! All I can say is that if you hope to cheat whoever-it-is tomorrow, *mes infants*, you have my blessing. What I'm afraid you *won't* have, is the time."

"Get the hell out of here," McClelland said quietly, while Catherine held his elbows, squeezing him, to remind him of his promise.

"I go, monsieur. I leave you to your newfound happiness—or isn't it newfound? But I'll be back soon. These boys are to remain, while I go to the camp for a little while. But I'll come back."

"Don't hurry," called McClelland.

BUT he wasn't sore; nothing could have made him sore, then. He had ceased to glower and to grumble. He kissed Catherine Hardesty quickly. "Now—" With gentle hands cupping her elbows, he half lifted and half pushed her gently aside. "Now we see whether this old crate's got a few miles of roll left in it."

While he bustled about the car with a light step he explained in snatches his plan, which was of the very essence of simplicity. They would start

the car, if they could. They would put it into second. They would go.

"But they'll shoot!"

"Sure they will. But you'll be lying flat on the bottom of the car when that happens. And do you suppose they'd hit me? I'm too lucky for that!"

He tapped the tank. Plenty of fuel. He climbed behind the wheel, and felt along the instrument-board that he couldn't see.

"Didn't he even lock it?"

"Oh, yes, but only the ignition. I can fix that, underneath, with my pen-knife and a chunk of wire. I'm an old hand at that sort of stuff, dear."

Wheel and brakes were all right. Tires were all right. He tested the gears.

He moved fast, and moved by feel; he knew this machine well.

"It's a shade too good to be true," he muttered as he climbed out. "He might not know that I could simply connect those two wires in back of the instrument-board— Still, on the other hand—"

He lifted the hood; and Catherine Hardesty, who felt weak, leaned against the radiator and with half-seeing eyes watched the three Bedouins who guarded the entrance. Désmoulin had called them "boys." It was a grotesque term to apply to these grim, scowling, bearded riders of the desert, smugglers and cutthroats who fingered their rifles out there in the drizzling sunlight.

For the sunlight seemed thinner. As she stood there, Catherine heard a far, muffled rumble of thunder. The Bedouins heard it too, and glanced at one another, nodding.

Ward's arms slid around her, pulling her away from the radiator.

"Kiss me first, darling, and then I'll tell you the bad news."

She caught her breath. "Is it— Can—"

"Kiss first, news afterward. God, but you're lovely!"

After a while he told her:

"He did the smartest thing he could have done. Good job I didn't try to start the engine, and give us away."

"What did he do?"

"Took the top off the distributor and lifted off the rotor arm. A little bit of a thing that he could have tucked into his vest pocket, if he wore a vest. It could be put back on in two seconds."

"But you can't run the car without it?"

"Not possibly. Can't even start the engine."

"Couldn't you improvise one, or something?"

"No. Only a crack mechanic, with all his equipment, could do that. And he'd take hours."

He too glanced toward the three grim guards. But he didn't sigh or

shake his head; and as another and nearer peal of thunder rumbled across the wasteland, he grinned.

"Come on, rain!" he murmured. "Come on! Let's see if you're all they say you are, out here!" He squeezed her shoulder, and shook her a little. "Catch on? If there's a nice good-natured little cloudburst, their tents out there will give those babies no end of work for a while."

"But if these three men— Ward, you're not thinking of rushing them?"

"No, sweetheart—I've got too much to live for. But the point is, they're down in this little declivity, and they can't look out over the desert for more than a few yards. If it rains, they'll edge farther in, naturally. And if everybody at the camp is busy, and the rain is a real tropical rain—they say it comes down so hard that it's practically like a pea-soup fog— Well, suppose we didn't go out by this entrance? Suppose we went out some other way?"

"Oh! . . . What makes you think there is another way? It's pitch dark back there—not a trace of light."

"True. But I chucked a stone a little while ago, when I went back to tap the petrol tank. And that stone rolled a long distance, Catherine. I never heard it hit anything at all. And look: Do what sailors used to do: Wet your finger and hold it up. . . . See?"

SHE nodded very slowly, and smiled, proud of him.

"Yes. There's a draft from back there."

"There is. Maybe it's a small opening, maybe it's a big one—or big enough. Anyway I just got a flashlight out of the toolbox. We won't use it at first—won't use it until we have to. Well, maybe it won't be any fun, but—what d'yuh say kid? Coming?"

"Of course I'm coming, Ward."

The air was dry, close and warm, almost hot; and it was so thin that they had difficulty breathing. They moved slowly, side by side, each with his free arm outstretched, feet sliding carefully forward so that they made no noise upon the earth and rubble. They could see nothing. It was as though they were walking into darkness that was like a solid wall; and it took an effort of will to walk into it.

McClelland whispered that he would not use the flashlight unless and until they were obliged to. There wasn't much juice left in its battery, for one thing; but more important was the fact that he did not wish to alarm the guards.

They had gone scarcely ten feet when all the world became bright for a terrifying instant, and there was a crash of thunder which deafened them—then darkness again, while their ears rang with echoes.

It had happened so swiftly, and was over so soon, and it had been so bright, that neither had really seen anything of their surroundings. Instinctively they had pressed closer together.

"We're really going to catch it, I guess."

They looked back briefly, past the ambulance. There was no sunlight around the entrance, where now the day resembled night; the three Bedouins had edged a little farther into the cavern, each holding his rifle tight, and each crouching a little, as men do crouch, as all animals and even plants do at the approach of a storm.

"Let's go, sweetheart."

At length their outstretched hands came upon a real wall. They felt along this, and up it, and down. It was dry and crumbly to the touch, and seemed to consist of soft sandy bricks with rounded edges—bricks which perhaps had been baked in some kiln a thousand years back.

Low down and a little to the right, Catherine's hands found an opening. It was not large, but they thought they could squeeze through it. When McClelland reached in, he waved a hand that found nothing.

"I'll go first," he whispered. "Squat in front here, so I can use the flash."

"You'll be careful, Ward?"

"I'll be careful."

He got down on his belly and wriggled through the opening he could not even see. He went on and on, the flashlight held ahead of him, the earth or ancient masonry tightly pressing his shoulders. He could not lift his head.

Once, when he paused, panting,—for it was strenuous work,—the searing thought came that perhaps he had been overoptimistic when he supposed that this tunnel led anywhere. There wasn't room to turn, and he might have to crawl all the way back, feet-first. He was appalled at the thought; it would take hours to make such a backward trip. Meanwhile the earth at any moment might give way, crushing him softly and without a sound.

He lay still, fighting panic that surged with his blood and beat against his temples and in his wrists. At last he drew a long breath, and wriggled on.

By and by his shoulders felt clear. He raised a hand. The ceiling was higher, though it still was not high enough to permit him even to get into a kneeling position.

He looked back, and could see nothing.

He switched on the flashlight.

Unquestionably the tunnel was broadening. It was featureless, simply a place which had never been filled in. It was less regular than he had supposed.

Of course this whole section of the desert would be a rabbit warren of such holes and half-buried chambers and tunnels. Some of the chambers might be connected with others. Some of the tunnels might dead-end.

He could only press on, wriggling faster now that he had more room, until at last he could get to his knees, and then to his feet. In truth, he had not come far, perhaps sixty or seventy feet; but it had seemed miles.

WHEN he was able to rise, when he could move the beam of the flash here and there to discover his surroundings, it was a weird scene he saw.

The chamber in which he stood was without distinction and almost without definable shape, though it was roughly rectangular. The pillars which upheld the ceiling, however, were more measurable, and were clearly the work of a race long since departed from this world. They were thick and perfectly round—fairly hard too, by no means granitic but harder than the bricks which composed the walls and ceiling. They were smooth and bore no decoration. Maybe it was his nerves, but it seemed to McClelland that as he moved the flashlight's beam, the shadows of these pillars, eerily swinging this way and that, challenged him to enter their midst. The ceiling was low and smooth, and he saw no gleam of light anywhere in it, though it must have been but a short distance under the level of the desert. The floor was fairly smooth, and littered with shards: he saw no evidence that anybody had recently walked there.

The draft, his wetted finger told him, came from somewhere in the midst of or beyond those fat leering columns.

He knelt, calling:

"All right. Come on. You should make it easily. I did."

Her voice came, though it sounded weak and far off:

"Is it hard? Is anything there?"

"It's not too hard. I don't know what's here yet, except that there's a lot of room. I want you with me before I start looking around."

It seemed to him that it took her much longer to make the trip than it had taken him, and he fussed about her, squatting beside the hole from time to time, waving the lighted flashlight there to encourage her, and calling her name anxiously. Her replies were clear but brief; he could tell that she was frightened. Also, she needed her breath.

The sound of thunder began to fill these strange underground rooms. It was indirect, faint, and this made it the more unreal. It was a distant mumbling that found its furtive way

in and out among the pillars. It seemed to lurk everywhere, and to be continuous, forming no echoes.

Had the rain started, up there? He turned the beam upon the ceiling, searching for moisture. The ceiling was dry. But this place *could*, he fancied, fill rapidly, at least to a depth of several inches, which would be enough to make passage back through the tunnel impossible.

Worried, fidgety (for this was harder than his own coming-through had been), he knelt once more at the mouth of the tunnel, whispering her name, asking anxiously how she was making out.

When she emerged, he helped her to her feet, and she laughed at him.

"You're a regular old woman!" she said.

Nevertheless he noticed when he clasped her in his arms that she was trembling all over, and he knew that he was trembling himself. He felt ludicrously weak, and his body was wet with sweat.

It was as he held her there, bending over her, that the first drop of water fell on the back of his neck.

He tried to keep grinning when he released her, though he knew that she could not see his face. Casually, talking rapidly as he did so, he flicked the light across the ceiling.

"Pretty grim, coming through there, wasn't it?"

"It was!"

"I've been thinking of Captain Wilde. Did you know him well?"

"Major Sennis introduced us only last night."

"Oh! Well, you know, I didn't like him—personally. But you've got to hand him credit: he had guts. The way he told those Wogs to go to hell and walked right off in front of their guns. He really had guts."

"That's such a nasty word. Couldn't you say he had courage?"

"No. Courage is something else. Something with a lot of flapping flags and so forth. But Wilde walked right straight on, with his back to them, never hurried, never turned, just because, damn it, he wasn't going to let anybody dictate to a British officer! You've got to give him credit."

"Yes . . . yes, of course. But right now we have ourselves to think of. Whatever got you talking about Captain Wilde?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Now, the ceiling was moist in four or five places. Unquestionably the rain was coming down hard, outside, though here below they could make out no sound of it, but only the sullen far pauseless thunder. At four or five places—and probably more; he did not dare rouse her fears by looking further—the water was darkening the ceiling in spots that spread, and in the center

of each spot a large pear-shaped drop constantly formed for the fall. This would increase, but how rapidly? He glanced down at the tunnel-end, and fear tugged with strong strings at his heart. His impulse was to hurl himself upon the ground and wriggle back to the cavern where the ambulance was, before that tunnel was filled with water.

Instead, he laughed.

"Sorry. I just got to thinking about Wilde, that's all. But as you say, we've got ourselves— Can you feel the draft?"

"Yes. It comes from over that way. What did this used to be?"

He shrugged.

"Part of some temple, maybe. Let's get moving."

The pillars themselves, obese and unblinking, were not disturbed by this sacrilegious intrusion of light; but their shadows leaped away from them, and swayed as the torch's beam jiggled, and each was like an angry evil spirit of the pillar it represented.

McClelland thought: "Scared of the dark, that's what I am!"

Aloud he said: "Stick close to me. The floor looks all right, but we want to play safe."

The place might be vast, or it might be no more than what they could see from the tunnel's end. Most likely it had once been vast but was now filled up in many places where the ceiling had fallen—and so limited, it might lead them nowhere. But he reminded himself of the draft. There must be *some* kind of opening ahead.

In case they might have to retrace their steps, he deliberately dragged one foot as he walked, making a track it would be easy to follow.

Water fell on them or around them from time to time, and the floor began to get slimy. Catherine had noticed it now, of course; she couldn't help noticing it. But she said nothing.

THEY went around each pillar carefully, slowly, as though expecting something to leap out. Wildly they thought, both of them, that they were not alone in this ancient place. It was a physical effort, a muscular effort, to present their backs to each pillar. Darkness closed in behind them.

When McClelland first began to see the light, he said nothing to her, not being certain of it. At best it was not direct, and pitifully dim, and the immediate beam of the flash made it difficult to see at all.

But soon she saw it too. He could tell this by the way her arm tightened around his waist.

In a whisper: "Ward?"

"Yes, dear?"

"That is a light, isn't it?"

"I think so. Here, I'll snap this out. We'll let our eyes get used to it."

Oddly, the disappearance of the bright beam seemed to cause the wan glow also to vanish. Had they been wrong? They stood holding one another, straining their eyes. The rumble of thunder which filled that sepulchral subterranean place now sounded louder. Was this imagination? Did they hear, through the thunder, the faint hiss of rain?

Something cold tapped McClelland sharply on the right hand. He started, almost dropping the flashlight.

"Sorry—I must be getting jittery."

"Water?"

"Yes. Let's go on."

They went around another pillar, McClelland still dragging his foot to make a trail. The floor was now a gluey paste. But the glow was there, ahead.

They went around still another pillar—and their feet struck something.

CLOSE together they stood, their hearts beating fast, staring wide-eyed at the box. It was a plain thing of dark wood, a sort of half-chest, perhaps two feet by a foot-and-a-half, and some ten inches deep, and had a cheap iron hasp. It did not belong there, for it was not antique but glossily new. As they stared at it, a tiny black snake, gleaming like a strip of patent-leather, slithered out from underneath it and squirmed silently away.

There was nothing else in sight but the pillars and their shadows.

"Let's get out, Ward, *please!* Look—we must be close to where that light's coming from!"

"Let's give a quick look, anyway. It's not locked. There might be something we can use."

He knelt swiftly, and lifted the lid.

The box was filled with paper.

It was paper cut in regular rectangular shapes, and neatly stacked, paper that had been issued by various governments. There was a great deal of it: the box was full.

McClelland dug his hands in, to well below the wrists, churning the mass. It was that way all the way down—Syrian livres, Bank of France francs, Egyptian pounds, Palestinian pounds, Iranian rials, Iraqi dinars, and, bulkiest and most numerous of all, many thick spongy bundles of Turkish hundred-pound notes.

There was no small money. The bills were all of large denominations. There was nothing else but these in the box.

"Ward! The torch! *Somebody's coming!*"

His chin jerked up; as he snapped off the flashlight, he closed the lid of the box guiltily, with his left hand. Still kneeling, he listened.

Yes, somebody was coming—from the direction of the gray smear of indi-



The Sheik fired. The lantern cast

rect light, whence came too the sound of thunder and rain. But beyond that sound and through it, they could hear hasty stumbling footsteps, stones kicked aside, and panting.

Soon too they saw yellow light which spun in slow revolving specks. Whoever he was, this man was in a hurry. And he carried a lantern.

They stood behind a pillar which their hands had found in the darkness. It was near the box. They had not dared retreat far, for fear the sound of their heels coming up from the slime would be heard. Tense, holding their breath, they waited.

The light bobbed nearer, and rounded a pillar—and they saw Désmoulins.

This was no shock of amazement. They had expected none other. All the same, the man's appearance jolted them.

Here was not the suave, confident Désmoulins they had so recently known. Here was not the grand vi-

zier, utterly sure of himself, and contemptuous of all around him.

In the first place, he was wet. His white *khafan*, everywhere splashed with mud, slapped against his large body, and his burnoose, torn and muddy, clung to his thick heavy neck. His face was shining with sweat as with rain water, and it gleamed in the up-thrown light of the lantern he held: his always protuberant eyes now appeared striving to pop out of his head. His mouth was working. His hands trembled.

He panted heavily, too. Almost they thought they heard him sob as he threw himself to his knees by the side of the box.

McClelland had feared that the man might see evidence of their presence at the box—filling footprints, or the marks of McClelland's own knees. He might have spared himself that worry. The deserter Colonel Désmoulins had no thought and no eyes for anything but the contents of the box. He



its light on the scattered money splashed with the Frenchman's blood.

was in the last stages of fright, and virtually hysterical.

The money came out in great handfuls. He stuffed it here and he stuffed it there, under his sopping sash, into the folds of his *khaftan*. Some slipped from his overeager hands, and cascaded brilliantly to the floor. Gasping, he scooped it up. He dropped some of it again. In his haste and nervousness he knocked over the lantern, but he righted this before it could go out.

Fascinated, like him they did not see the Sheik until the Sheik was at Désmoulins' very side—an immense white figure, a walking ghost, with drug-maddened eyes. He had carried no lantern, being able to follow Désmoulins' light. But he had a pistol in each hand.

Désmoulins actually screamed. He tried to turn away, and tried to rise from his knees, but fear held him still.

The Sheik cocked one of the pistols.

Light from the lantern smashed through the stones in his bangles and

his rings, and, multiplied a million times, swarmed across the wet dark ceiling in the form of bright flecks of red, green, yellow, blue. When he cocked the pistol these flecks wavered crazily, stirring, a vast jarred rainbow cloud, then were still again.

Désmoulins found voice, and babbled; what words he said the watchers from behind the pillar could not know, but certainly the man was pleading, imploring mercy, frantically trying to explain.

The Sheik lifted the cocked pistol. Except in his eyes there was no expression on his face. It was miraculous that he was upright; he seemed a dead thing of vengeance, something from long ago—one of the priests, perhaps, who centuries before had faced their victims here.

In his panic Désmoulins switched to French, then to English. He was stark mad.

"For you, don't you understand? Been saving it here for you! . . . My

God, don't kill me! *Don't kill me now!* Let them take me out and—"

The Sheik fired.

Thrown back on his elbows, somehow the Frenchman struggled to an upright position again. He shouldn't have been able to do so. He must have taken the shot fairly in the chest, at point-blank range, and he should have been already dead. But such was his vitality, or his hysteria, that somehow he rose to his previous position. He could no longer talk in any tongue, for blood was frothing at his mouth and oozing down to his chin. But with his hands he tried piteously to claw the Sheik's robe.

The Sheik cocked the second pistol, and leveled it so that the muzzle was not more than two inches from Désmoulins' face.

Even McClelland could not watch that shot. He closed his eyes.

The explosion rocked the temple, and its echoes crashed and banged among the pillars, while loosened

drops fell in a shower from the ceiling, slapping softly into the mud.

It must have been old-fashioned black powder in the cartridges the Sheik used. The smoke, when McClelland looked again, was floating in long sluggish ribbons, and it stung his eyes and throat. Through it, while it reluctantly moved, he saw the Sheik replace the pistols in his sash, all the time staring at the thing which had been Jean Désmoulins, and which now had no face.

The Sheik moved with an unearthly forced slowness, like a diver who walks under water. Despite the fact that he was thoroughly wet, his thin cretaceous face seemed still dry as though from the tomb: it was the substance of chalk, and in it, in all the man, only those hate-hot eyes lived.

Greed came into those eyes, replacing the hatred, when he gazed at the money strewn over the box and over the corpse and over the ground. The place was carpeted with money.

The Sheik leaned toward it, his bony white beringed fingers crooked like talons, while the gold and silver chains around his neck, disturbed, clinked as if apologetically. Then he straightened; no doubt he had decided that the picking-up of so much, scattered so far, would be beyond his failing strength. He glared again at Désmoulins, and McClelland could see from his eyes that even murder had not diminished the hatred he felt for the man. Deliberately, twice, he kicked Désmoulins' body.

He turned. Nodding—or rather, his head moved back and forth as though agitated by some outside agency, like a tassel of corn on a stalk stirred by the dry summer breeze—he made off, moving very slowly, dragging his feet, wheezing a little.

He did not take the lantern, which continued to cast its sickly light on Désmoulins and on the spewed scattered money that was splashed with the Frenchman's blood.

For a time they heard his halting steps through the thunder and the rain. The ribbons of smoke gradually dissolved. Large round greasy drops of water fell intermittently from the roof: one of them splashed upon the lantern's globe, which hissed in indignation.

Ward McClelland released Catherine, studying her anxiously. She could stand, though her eyes remained shut. He propped her against the pillar.

"Wait here for me, you understand? Just a minute, no more!"

Her hands felt blindly for him, begging him not to go.

"Just one minute. . . . I'll be right back."

Searching the Frenchman was the hardest job he had ever done. He

fought nausea every second of the time, and he was weak and dizzy.

He found a Browning automatic, which he pocketed. This was not what he sought. At last he found them! They were in a little silk bag suspended by a cord around Désmoulins' neck: he could feel them through the bag. He jerked this off, breaking the cord. It made the head bob as he did so, as though the grisly faceless corpse were nodding agreement.

Somehow he got back to Catherine. "Come on! No, not that way! They'll be coming that way!"

OF the next half-hour neither afterward could remember much. They found the tunnel, thanks to the tracks McClelland had left, and they crawled and wriggled wildly through it, though it contained more than an inch of water which sometimes slopped over their mouths when they couldn't hold their chins high. They found the ambulance, and from that point they were able to view the rain directly and to see how fierce it was.

Over the entrance of the cavern hung, it looked, a silver-gray sheet. Nothing was visible beyond this. Each wheel-track was a spate of water, leaping and gurgling like a mountain stream. The din was deafening.

At first they did not see the guards. It was not until McClelland had replaced the rotor arm in the distributor and switched on the ignition with the key which, together with the rotor arm, he'd found in the little bag around Désmoulins' neck—it was not until then that they saw the guards, who crouched, shivering, on either side of the entrance.

"Lie down in back!"

"I won't! I'm going to sit up next to you!"

"Don't be such a damn heroine! You don't need to try—"

"I can have guts too—since you like that word so much!"

"In you, darling, it's foolishness, not guts!"

They had to shout at one another. He had started the engine, which was dry and picked up instantly, but even when he raced it they could not hear it over the roar of rain. The guards couldn't have heard it either; but they must have sensed it. They stepped across the entrance, their rifles at the ready, and shouted something inaudible.

"Gangway!" cried McClelland.

He pushed over the four-wheel drive lever. He put the car into second, and threw in the clutch.

At the rise it *sweet-ed* and slipped; for a heartrending instant, quivering, straining in agony, it did not move an inch. The guards were shooting. McClelland knew that, as Catherine did. McClelland even fancied that he

could hear the shots, jerky tiny "*pip*" sounds through the rain's overwhelming racket. He might have been mistaken.

The sickening instant passed. The tires held. They went up, and out. Then they were on level desert; and though the ground was a bog strewn with spear-tips, and he couldn't see ten feet in any direction, McClelland put the car into high gear and slapped his right foot flat on the floorboard.

Finding the Hassechli track, half an hour later, was sheer luck. They might easily have crossed it without knowing it. There, somehow, they felt safe; though still a long way from any town, they felt as though they were on a broad fine highway. Ward McClelland stopped the car, laughing a little from nervousness, and he and Catherine kissed and whispered, each reassuring the other.

Afterward they counted the holes in the windshield. That the glass was all white was a fact they had previously attributed to the rain, which indeed would have made it that way anyway. Now they learned that there were four separate holes, each surrounded by a lacy web.

"If we'd known that at the time we'd have been pretty scared, eh?" said McClelland.

He fished from a pocket a tiny silk bag.

"Look! There were only three things in it. The rotor arm, the ignition key, and this—"

He held up a small bright strip of ribbon that had been torn from a tunic.

"He might have burned his uniform, but he saved this: the Colonial medal, the Médaille Militaire, and a double-palmed Croix de Guerre. He was no slouch, our deserter!"

McClelland tucked the ribbon carefully into a pocket.

"In case they find him later. . . . He may rate it for his burial. I suppose when deserters— Well, I wouldn't know."

He started the engine, put the car into gear, let out the clutch pedal, and amid a noisy splatter they remained where they were. He tried it in reverse. They didn't move. The main highway, eh? They were stuck in mud! He shut off the engine, and turned to Catherine.

"*Mahleesh!* Somebody will come along sooner or later—tomorrow, anyway. We've got plenty of bully and tea and sugar. And we've got—"

He paused, grinning.

She was smiling slowly at him. She shook her head.

"You wouldn't be satisfied with anything less, would you?"

"No," he said as he folded her into his arms. "Certainly not! I'm one of these everything-or-nothing guys."

Shrike

The shrike or
butcher-bird, is
not recognized by
the other birds for
the killer he is.



*A Complete
Book-length Novel*
by WILLIAM BRANDON

*Behind him Ireland heard the
old man say: "Oh, God
A'mighty! God Merciful
A'mighty!"*

Shrike

A complete book-length novel

by WILLIAM BRANDON



FROM the notebook of Hector Pine, Ph.D.
Monday:

That damned Kistry has been into my Scotch again.

Why do I have to put up with these dismal pettifogging irritations? I am old. I am venerable. My years should be full of peace. My hoary head should nod in retrospective contemplation: I should pat my belly and smile and peer wisely over my spectacles back along the corridor of life; I should think thoughts of metaphysics. But I am bald, and if I peer over my spectacles I see nothing; and instead of contentment I am living in the lap of this hideous thing that has visited us. And Kistry steals my Scotch. How can petty annoyances transcend the grand tragedy of life! Would it have eased Antigone's suffering to have locked a mosquito with her in the catacomb?

That is my seventy-first birthday I see around the corner, dancing in its bones. Must get to the country before it reaches me. Perhaps it won't look so unsightly there. If, may be, by the grace of God—

Must get to the country. Spring is hard upon us. Can't bear the emasculated spring of the city. Soon there will be flowers on that beech tree in the park where I have seen the one-eyed jay. The young leaves are unfolding now from the bud. It seems to me their color is watery and simpering. They have nothing of the abounding life that is a very part of the personality of that great beech on the farm.

What a beast and a blight is a city! The angel said Babylon is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornications. Is there ever a natural spot on this globe accursed and fouled as is the site of a city? A brook or a river or a hilltop? Would a comprehensive comparison of brain-sections of city- and non-city-dwellers yield any evidence of modification from this wretched environment? No, such modification is of the soul. And the city sings at the top of its screaming voice, and the rocks and the trees and a lark and a hermit thrush and a brown wren listen in the wind. In Theocritus' words, they are as cicadas challenged by a frog. . . .

Ireland, the detective, came at last this morning. I don't like him. He has the greedy basilisk-eyed breath of the city on him. He dresses like a macaroni. I don't trust him, but—good God, I have to trust someone! Kistry put him in one of the good rooms, which is an indication that she too, in her way, found him an arrogant sort. I told him very little. Put it off as long as I can. He is supposed to constitute a household guard; that is enough for the present. Wait, wait, that's the thing, wait—how can I work? If it were not for May— The rest of them can be damned.

I am planning to preserve a branch of that male fern this summer—tell Kistry to remember acetone and verdigis to take with us up to the farm.

Harold playing the piano. It is four floors away, and it hammers in my ears. Why? Because it is bad music.

I could of course chop off his hands. They should have atrophied and dissolved and disappeared by now anyhow, like the parasite hookworm's digestive apparatus.

Among the birds at my feeding-box this morning was a gray-cheeked thrush (*minima aliciae*) that flew through my open study window and beat about the room in some excitement, causing me to overturn a bottle of ink in my haste to throw open the skylight—upon which I swore at it, forgetting myself. I don't often swear at birds; there's no reason not to, but I generally like to swear at something that can swear back if it wants to. And that's the sickness of the age: people don't swear back at you the way they used to in the old knobby-handed days of my youth—why, these taxi-drivers would swallow their tongues without salt if an old-time Front Street teamster should so much as lay the feeblest of his vocabulary at them. Indeed, that's why the sky lacks the blueness of old: all that blue electric cussing that used to drift up to heaven in a perfect lather of glorious rich color is gone now, withdrawn from the minds of men and twinkling in anemic drugstore signs, probably. It's so; it is so—anyway, the moment I swore at it, that fool thrush perched on a picture-frame and sat there in shocked dignity, averting its eyes, until I opened the skylight and it flew out at once, very loftily and virginally. Of course, the bird is a victim of its nomenclature; it is Alice's thrush, and thus shyly, maidenly patronized, what can it do but blush aside at hard words?

It is unusually early for this bird to be passing through.

SAM IRELAND SAT ON A BENCH in the park, and a little girl came out of the high-fenced playground.

"I'm going to have supper pretty soon," she said.

"Is that a fact?" Ireland said. Kids were strange to him, and he kept his distance with the same passing but respectful interest he would show a talking cheetah. Therefore children universally liked him, and tormented him with their attention.

"Pretty soon," the little girl repeated.

Ireland lit a cigarette. He was a big man, carefully dressed to hide his bigness, his boniness; his face carefully dressed with inexpression to hide his rough country features, inherited from a race of men with wide-spaced cheekbones, wide mouths and ready laughs. He was thinking that the little girl was a nice little girl, but the little girl's pretty nurse, sitting inside the playground fence with a blanket around her knees, occupied with her book, was nicer. Her name was Helen! but Ireland was so far limited to knowing her as Miss Peabody.

"Are you hungry, Sam?" the little girl demanded. "Are you going to eat supper with May?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you going to eat supper with Hector? And see Kistry?"

"Do you like Kistry?"

"I like Kistry. Kistry's colored."

"Miami's colored too," Ireland suggested.

"Miami don't like May very much. . . . Are you going to eat supper with Harold and all the cousins?"

"Do you like the cousins too?"

"Mmm—" She swung on his hand, and hummed.

The cousins, three cousins, wives, husbands and other appurtenances, gathered into the fold from Cannes and from Biarritz and from Hawaii by the explosion of their world and the security of Dr. Pine's world and the fourth cousin's handsomely glittering riches. The fourth cousin, the Bryndel cousin, in whom resided the great bulk of the fortune: this was May, perched upon her wealth giggling and swinging her heels while the cousins—her uncles and aunts, great-uncles and great-aunts—stood about with bright and beautiful smiles, loving and hopeful.

Ireland thought deeply of this, watching the little girl swing at the end of his arm. She was a three-year-old child, and she was the titular ruler of some eleven million

dollars, because her great-great-grandfather had wrestled well with fortune in a certain golden age.

A bird sang some place near them, and May stood still and listened, and said: "That's Hector, I think."

CHAPTER TWO



DR. HECTOR ASA PINE had lived an earnest life of earnest simplicity, to which his old brownstone house attested. The first and fourth floors only were occupied. The two middle floors had been closed for fifty years. The furnishings were worn and unkempt, from parquet flooring in need of wax to Mechlin point curtains torn and indifferently mended. Everywhere were mounted birds—two thousand specimens, Miss Peabody had said, not including the Doctor's study collection of a hundred or more unmounted birdskins—trophies, cases of preserved plants and insects. In the distant past of his idle youth Dr. Pine had taken a Ph.D. through boredom, with a thesis, chosen more or less at random, on the coloration of ground-inhabiting birds of North America; and he had, sometimes to his own surprise, been an industrious amateur ornithologist ever since.

Ireland followed May and Miss Peabody past the bald eagle hovering in the foyer, and saw them into the self-service elevator in the hall.

"Good-by," May said. "Good-by, Sam Ireland."

"Good-by," Ireland said.

Miss Peabody laughed and said: "She likes you."

"Women do," Ireland said.

Miss Peabody smiled serenely, much as he had expected her to do, and closed the elevator door.

"Mr. Ireland!" Cousin Charles appeared in the hall. Lean, smiling, gray-mustached, Charles had the distinguished look of a whisky advertisement. He was, moreover, carrying a cocktail glass. Cousin Charles Bregan, from Biarritz! Ireland placed him chiefly as the father of the deeply tanned girl Louise, the girl with the wounded sailor. Charles said: "Come in a moment, won't you? We all want to see you." He smiled, and his teeth were white under the clipped mustache. "Uncle Hector wants to talk to you later, but the rest of us may as well get your okay first on our evening plans. Right?"

He clapped Ireland cordially on the shoulder, and walked with him through a corner of the library to what had once been the drawing-room, now furnished down to a commoner qualification. Charles bounced in his walk with a very springy step, and Ireland began to realize that Charles was soused. He hadn't tagged Charles as a rumpot, when he had met the family that morning. They entered the drawing-room and found cousin Harold Jeans playing the piano, and balancing on his head a telephone directory and a small stand mounting a junco. The others were grouped about the fireless marble fireplace. A shield of crossed ice-axes, and a twelve-point buck, a trifle wall-eyed from age, looked down on them from the wall.

"Here he is," Charles said; and Harold broke in on their greetings to raise his self-conscious eyes to Ireland and say: "It doesn't do any good to be psychoed if I keep trammeling the subconscious. I have to free it somehow." He swallowed guiltily, and went back to his halting music.

The guy suffered when he made a fool of himself, Ireland thought; but he suffered anyhow, and he was probably a fool anyhow, so what did it matter? Harold sat erect on the piano bench, balancing the book and stand on his head, and the back of his skinny neck was scarlet.

Isabella, Harold's wife, half his age, startlingly blonde and startlingly attractive in this room of aunts and uncles, her amused blue eyes and vermilion satirical lips vivid and young among them, made room on the couch and

said: "Sit with me, Mr. Ireland." Louise and the ensign, Hatch, were absent. Charles' wife, feminine counterpart of her husband, poised, smooth-skinned, perfectly groomed silver hair, was seated at a backgammon table across from Hebe's husband, George. Cousin Hebe sat in a rocking chair beside the fireplace, knitting, and drinking milk. Isabella said: "Harold will bring you a drink."

Harold turned at the sound of his name, and the book and stand fell off his head. He made a broad gesture of dismay, while his eyes were agonized with shame, and dropped down to find the stuff on the floor. Ireland sat down, and Charles brought him a drink.

"I don't think we should take up any more of Mr. Ireland's time than necessary," he began. "Uncle Hector wants to see him. So we had best get our permissions while we may." He raised his voice and called: "Louise!"

"The whole thing is ridiculous," Hebe said mildly. (Cousin Hebe from Hawaii, Ireland had thought, archetype *vahine*.) She was plump and motherly; the corners of her mouth were tucked in plump cheeks; and her gentle eyes were pouched in motherly wrinkles. George cooperated by looking like Father, a quiet, wispy-haired little man, wearing a frayed smoking jacket. He was lame with a clubfoot. They had no children. Hebe put down her knitting and sipped her milk. "It is all right for May, certainly; but for us—"

"Quite," Charles said; "but as it is Uncle Hector's household and we are his guests—"

"And we're all scared stiff," Isabella said.

Charles laughed. "Perhaps we are, at that."

"It is pointless to discuss it with Mr. Ireland if he knows nothing about it," Mrs. Bregan said.

"Yes," Charles said. "Yes, of course. Mr. Ireland is our bodyguard, and that's that. We have agreed to place ourselves under Mr. Ireland's protection, and we have agreed that inasmuch as he can't guard all of us all of the time, we will submit our movements outside the house to his prior approval. Right?" He winked at Isabella, and his teeth flashed in a smile. "Inasmuch as our movements are his concern. Right? Then I propose we stand to this agreement and make this as easy for Mr. Ireland as we can. Right? Whether we think we need protecting or whether we think Uncle Hector is—"

"Charles," his wife said, giving up her backgammon, "you do talk so much."

"Very well," Charles said. He drank his drink and rolled the liquor on his tongue. "I conclude. I, for one, am going down to my club after dinner for a game or two of chess. Bus to Thirty-seventh Street, and back. Safe enough, Mr. Ireland?"

HEBE SAID: "I'VE BEEN thinking that we should have a birthday party for Uncle Hector next Sunday. Speaking of Thirty-seventh Street reminded me. I must go down to Concord's and get him something."

Louise and the ensign, Hatch, a big-shouldered youth with a blocky, good-natured face, came in from the pantry.

"We've mixed another round," Louise said. "Hello, Mr. Ireland."

Hatch put down the cocktail pitcher and pointed his finger at Ireland and said in a gravelly voice: "*Bang-bang!*" He grinned and picked up the pitcher again and touched it against the back of Mrs. Bregan's neck. She uttered a little scream. "Have another snort, Mom," Hatch said.

Charles said, "We're taking up Mr. Ireland's time here, and if we intend to—"

"We're telling Mr. Ireland our plans for the evening," Hebe said. "You children must cooperate."

"Hey," Hatch said, "out here in front of God and everybody? Don't talk, baby."

"I'll stay home with a good book," Louise said. "I just decided." She patted her father's hand and sat down on the arm of the couch with a drink.

"I rather hope you mean that," Mrs. Bregan said. "I'm sure Hatch hasn't been home for a week."

"Aint you a crock of it, Mom?" Hatch said.

"Harold and I will stay home," Isabella said. "We always do. Won't you pour me a little more, Hatch?"

"Sure will, honey," Hatch rasped agreeably. He regarded Isabella's silken legs, revealed by a casual arrangement of her skirt for Ireland's admiration, and he laughed at her. Isabella met his eyes merrily and laughed with him, and glanced at Mrs. Bregan. "You must tell us your plans, Laura."

Mrs. Bregan was nettled. She said: "I am not at all certain. I may—" Harold began again on Debussy at the piano, and Mrs. Bregan said sharply, "Harold, will you please," and he stopped, feverishly embarrassed. The book and stand, which he had put back on his head, fell off again. "I may," Mrs. Bregan continued, "go to the theater with friends. Does that meet with your approval, Mr. Ireland?"

To some of them, Ireland thought, this thing was a farce, entered into merely to humor old Dr. Pine; but for the others the fear was real fear, and he wondered why there should be a difference.

A bodyguard for the little girl was one thing; for these people another. They were old enough to take care of themselves.

He said: "If you use common precaution. Stay on lighted streets and have someone with you. In fact, that goes for all of you. If you're in danger, don't take any chances. When you go out, it would be a good idea to take a cab. Call for it and have it waiting at the door. At night particularly. Don't go out alone."

"George and I, of course," Hebe said, knitting placidly, "will be at home."

George took his pipe out of his mouth and studied the stem and stuck it back in his mouth without speaking.

Harold got up from the piano and danced glidingly around the room, flapping his arms. "I'm a bird," he said, gulping out each word in a nightmare of self-consciousness. "I'm a bird, I'm a little bird." He picked up the mounted junco and danced with it.

Miami, a fat colored woman in a stiff white apron, appeared beyond the doorway and caught Mrs. Bregan's eye. Mrs. Bregan rose.

"Dinner, Charles."

"Dr. Pine, he say Mr. Ireland come right up," Miami added, and shuffled away.

CHAPTER THREE



IRELAND went up in the little elevator, past the dust-sheeted second and third floors; and, as he stepped out at the top floor, Dr. Pine was waiting in the lighted door of his study.

"In here," Dr. Pine said shortly. He was a stumpy, bowlegged old man with silver-rimmed spectacles lopsided on his nose, and a cheap white wig askew on his bumpy bald head. The skin of his neck hung in seamed folds, and the liver-spotted skin of his hands, likewise, had become too roomy for his shrunken flesh.

He ushered Ireland into the study, past a loon that swam forever on a shiny wooden table—its legs wired through holes bored in the top—and thrust a pile of books and bulletins off a tapestry chair and bade Ireland sit down. He fumbled his way behind his desk and stood there looking at Ireland pugnaciously.

"May all right?"

"She's eating her supper now."

Dr. Pine cuffed his wig up over his eye like a hat-brim and sat back in his swivel chair with a squeak, gave Ireland a long and angry look and dropped his attention to cracking his knuckles.

He was extremely upset, Ireland thought. Something had happened. The old man's restlessness was on the edge of panic.

"I'm going up to my farm," Dr. Pine said abruptly. "Now—tonight! So is May and Helen. So is Kistry. I don't give a damn if the others do or not. Sha'n't wait for them." He drummed on the desk. "I don't mean that. We must all stay together. But I sha'n't wait for them. . . . I want you to come with us."

The study door opened and Kistry looked in, smiling cheerfully. "Dr. Pine, it just now come to me that—"

"Coffee!" Dr. Pine barked.

She went on unruffled: "I thought, maybe all this time could it be that May just playing?" She was a thin and handsome mulatto, her eyes bright and intelligent behind tinted glasses. She had an odd, rolling walk and a chirping, hustling manner. Her hair was touched with gray.

"No!" Dr. Pine shouted, slapping his hands flat on the arms of his chair. "Hell's fire! Don't bother me with stupidities! Coffee!"

"All rightie," Kistry said. She withdrew.

Dr. Pine got up and walked with his old man's quick shambling steps to the window that looked down into the courtyard dusk four stories below. He stood there a moment, absently stroking a pileated woodpecker at his side, and turned around at last, grunting:

"Ireland, I've hired you as a guard for this household—at a thousand dollars a week. Tell me what you've thought about that. I'm not one to throw money away. I live in extreme simplicity. Always have. Tell me exactly what you think."

"Well," Ireland said, "it's too much price for a bodyguard. The police are experts, and they do it for nothing." He considered. "You've received threats; they carry conviction, and you're afraid; but you want to keep it private. It's worth a thousand dollars a week to you to keep it strictly private."

Dr. Pine studied him ruminatively.

"You're correct," he said. "Correct, of course."

He seated himself again at his desk.

"A friend of mine is chairman of the board of Ulco. He told me you had done an excellent job for them—something about their general manager. . . . I wanted the best, the very best."

He took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes.

He said: "It's only that kid May I care about. To hell with the others! Those clowns, those fools. . . . I don't mean that, either. I want to keep this thing away from all of us. We must keep it away. Must stick together. This time."

"I can't follow you without the facts," Ireland pointed out.

"Yes," Dr. Pine said. He chewed rapidly on nothing. "It is painful to tell. It is painful to contemplate—ghastly to believe. I went so far as to call you in because I would not take chances with May, but still with the absurd hope in my mind that nothing would happen, and that sooner or later it would—dissolve like any ugly phantasmagoria."

Dr. Pine drew out a handkerchief, pushed back his white wig and mopped his face. He fell still in thought.

Kistry came in with the coffee, in a heavy silver service on a tarnished silver tray.

"Here you are," she said cheerfully. "Nice and strong and hot."

"Kistry," Dr. Pine ordered, "call downstairs and tell the others we are going to the country tonight. Tell them I sha'n't wait for them if they are not ready. If they can be ready to accompany us on the three o'clock train, make reservations for them. Have you telephoned the farm? Speak to Helen as soon as she has put May to bed. And I'm hungry."

"Dinner in just a jiffy," Kistry said. She hummed beneath her breath as she arranged the utensils on the tray.

When she had gone, Dr. Pine said: "Pull up your chair. Have some coffee. Care for it laced?" Without regard for Ireland's reply, he unlocked a drawer of his desk and brought out a bottle of brandy. He then carefully filled the cups one-third full of coffee and brought them up level with brandy.

He sat bolt upright in his chair and drank. "Ah!" He smacked his lips and drank again, in a manner to be described as quaffing. "That's better," he said, blowing out his breath. "Better, much better." He killed the drink, put down the cup and sat back in his chair.

"Primarily," he said at last, "Understand that these threats are not new. Harold and Charles and Hebe came back from abroad, and have been living with me here now for a matter of a year or so. These letters started when they returned to this country."

He rummaged in his desk and brought out a manila envelope secured with a rubber band.

"Take these along. Study them."

"You will find they are merely anonymous letters, obscurely threatening in tone. It will seem strange to you they have disturbed us here, as they have. It is because we know who is writing them."

FROWNING, IRELAND OPENED the envelope. The letters were a bundle of scraps of yellow paper, each bearing a few words printed in soft black pencil.

"A woman," he guessed, studying the printing.

"She was raised in this house," Dr. Pine said, "as a member of the family. Her name is Bertha Arriven."

He wagged a hand when Ireland would speak.

"She subsequently spent nine years in a hospital for the insane. She was released in 1936. Shortly after, she was in a taxicab smash-up and severely injured. Pelvis broken. None of us have been able to find any trace of her since then. Of course I made efforts to locate her when these letters started coming here. After the accident"—the old man spread a hand—"nothing."

Ireland glanced over the first letter, his underlip thrust out, doubt in his mind. It read: "*Hello, Harold. —S.*"

The old man watched him, his chin working. He said: "*S stands for shrike.*"

Ireland looked up. "Shrike? A bird?"

"A bird," Dr. Pine said. "A bird that kills other birds. The butcher-bird." He got out his handkerchief again and blew his nose lustily. "Of course she is still insane. It was schizophrenia, you see. The woman came to believe she was a shrike."

Ireland replaced the rubber band around the manila envelope and put the letters in his pocket.

He said: "What has she got against this family?"

"Hate," Dr. Pine answered promptly. "Violent, implacable hate." He read the succeeding question in Ireland's face and said: "Of course she has reason. She believes she has. That's all that matters."

HE STOOD UP suddenly and leaned over the desk and pounded with his fist on the desk's cluttered top, and the coffee service danced on the tray.

"I assure you, Ireland, she will if she can kill every member of this family. . . . Exactly as a shrike kills, with delight, without mercy."

"All right," Ireland said, and Dr. Pine sat down, blowing out his breath, sweat standing on his yellow face.

"What else, since the letters?"

"A dead shrike left outside the front door one night last week. Where the hell she got it, I don't know. It was after that that I made up my mind to hire protection for May."

Dr. Pine paused and watched his old hands flutter over the desk, lifting papers aimlessly.

"Today, two mounted specimens were stolen from this room. One from that stand by your chair. One from this perch here."

Ireland got up to look at the perches. "Shrikes?"

"Yes. Of course! A migrant and a loggerhead. Bertha collected the specimens herself, years ago."

"These perches are damp."

"Softened the feet with wet cotton, so she can mount them some place else. She took her time. I was out of here for an hour or two this afternoon, taking my nap. She did it then."

Ireland said: "I see." He sat on the corner of Dr. Pine's desk and lit a cigarette, still eying the empty perches.

He said: "To a cop, your hypothesis isn't very sound. You keep this house locked twenty-four hours a day. When anyone comes in downstairs, Miami lets them in. The service gate is closed with an electrically operated lock that Miami operates from a switch in the kitchen. Those are the only ways of getting into the house."

"Miami swears she let no one in."

Ireland snapped his fingers. "So your shrike-woman cracks the place like that. It's easy to say. But it's a damned hard trick to turn. Try to get into a locked house sometime—in the city, with metal grillwork at your first-floor doors and windows."

Dr. Pine gnarled: "Did I tell you she was raised here? She knows this house as well as I do."

Ireland said dryly: "How would you get in?"

Dr. Pine roared in a sudden fury: "For the blood of Jesus, do you think I stole them myself?" He chewed violently, glaring at Ireland with an intense dislike. "It's evident from your attitude that you take no stock whatever in the reality of these threats. Possibly you think those birds were stolen as a practical joke, by one of those dunces downstairs! But you never knew Bertha Arriven. I did."

"You said she was a schizophrenic," Ireland remarked. "In that case, as I understand it, she'd be more likely to withdraw from the world than take part in it."

"Perhaps," Dr. Pine said in a more reasonable tone. "We really know very little about those things. But—"

"Yes," Ireland said, "as far as I'm concerned, a whack is unpredictable."

ONE OF THE PERCHES was high above the floor, a simulated twig on a simulated branch extending as high as the top bookshelf. The thief, if short, had used the near-by bookladder.

"But," Dr. Pine said, "I feel that I know what goes on in that woman's sick mind." Ireland gave him a curious look, wondering at the meaning behind the strange note in his voice, and Dr. Pine shot out his jaw and snapped: "That's why I am afraid."

Kistry opened the door and rolled in dinner on a teacart.

Ireland ate with the old man, a silent meal as Dr. Pine went to his food with voracity, his attention directed singly to the business at hand. He ate with a rush, and the veins stood out on his head below the incongruous woolly white of the wig. He consumed stuffed pork chops, French fried potatoes, salad, hot biscuits, and a half dozen cups of coffee; he pushed aside with a grunt the dessert of giant hothouse strawberries, and prepared another brandy laced with coffee.

"So," he said, leaning back to savor his liqueur, and his dinner was over. For a time he was attacked by hiccups; then he got out a crumpled brown-paper bag from his desk, apparently kept there for the purpose, and breathed deeply into it a few times and the hiccups went away.

"She's a good cook," Ireland said.

"Very good," Dr. Pine agreed. He seemed to look more rationally on the world, now that he had fed. "She's an exceptional woman. Acts as my secretary, you know. She's only been with me five years, but she has become a very keen naturalist. Remarkable! Of course, she is going up to the farm with us."

He poured brandy into Ireland's empty coffee cup. His faded eyes glinted behind his glasses, gauging Ireland sharply.

"You're still of the opinion I am making a mountain out of a molehill. But the point is, she has been here. In the house. This afternoon—in the house."

"Well," Ireland said, "I'll go through the middle floors again."

"No, to hell with that! We've been over the place times without number. Spend your evening getting packed and ready to leave."

"The fact that she has been able to get into the house in spite of my precautions may mean little to you, or you may even refuse to believe it, as you will; but I tell you—and I am a hard-headed practical man and I am not given to jumping at shadows—that it leaves me but one alternative: To get out and close the house as soon as possible. We'll be gone in four hours. The farm—she can't reach us at the farm."

Ireland said with a trace of impatience: "Why can't you get the help of the police? Why do you have to—"

"Police—newspapers—and a Roman holiday," Dr. Pine said. "I do not want to call in the police. I have told you that."

The old man, Ireland thought, was not paying a yard a week to keep out of the papers; nor did he expect Ireland to believe he was; nor did he expect Ireland to inquire further into his reasons. He was paying his money and taking his choice of what he would keep to himself.

He said again: "It's May I worry for. Little kid. Why should she—"

He left the question unfinished, and a train of unwelcome pictures crossed his mind and his eyes were bitterly unhappy. He pushed his glasses up on his forehead and bent his head to his hand and said angrily: "It's the Bryndel curse—the girl children who die young. Her mother was just twenty-one, two years ago. She and her husband died at sea, from a submarine."

CHAPTER FOUR



DOWNSTAIRS. Ireland found Hatch and Louise in what had been, in the glory of the house, the butler's pantry. It was a small and warmly paneled room, fitted about with drawers and cupboards. Miami's folding ironing-board stood in one corner. Hatch and Louise were playing cribbage at a white-enamelled table, a bottle of beer between them.

"You are so coming up to the farm," Louise said heatedly, noticing Ireland's entrance by extending the beer-bottle in invitation. "It's just the place for you to convalesce. Do you think you're simply going to slop around the bars down here for the next six weeks?"

"Bah!" Hatch said. "Your old lady doesn't want me." He slapped down a card and said in his voice of a bull-frog with a cold: "Eight."

"My guests are my own. She isn't my mother, anyway. Don't ever pay any attention to her." She said hotly: "Ever!"

"Play your cards," Hatch said.

"I mean it. I really mean it." Ireland took a card from her and played it and said, "Fifteen," and scored for her on the board. Louise insisted: "Do you hear me, Joe Hatch?"

"Eighteen," Hatch said.

"Are you coming up? Right away, by Friday maybe?"

"Twenty-eight," Ireland said.

"Joe—Hatch!"

"Go," Hatch said.

"One for the go," Ireland said, moving the peg on the board. "One for the last play. Where are the rest of them?"

"They're around some place," Louise said. "All getting ready to leave as fast as they can. Harold keeps saying he hears things."

"What's that?"

"Oh, he's always hearing things or something. Hatch, I want you to be sensible. She isn't even my mother, and she doesn't have anything at all—absolutely nothing—to do with me. And besides, Uncle Hector likes you, and it's his farm. Well, isn't it?"

There were voices in the adjoining hall, and Mr. and Mrs. Bregan came in with a little fat man Ireland did not know.

"Stevie!" Louise cried. She jumped up and hugged the fat man and kissed him. "Oh, Stevie! Not for ages!"

The fat man laughed, laugh lines all over his round face, and rumbled her black hair.

"Still my girl, aren't you?"

"As if I could ever be anybody else's! Golly, it's swell, Stevie! When did you get in?"

"Where'd you get that Biscay sun tan? I was hoping you'd been back long enough to lose it." His face was wreathed in smiles. "I'd rather like to see what you look like sometime."

"On the roof. I take sun-baths and— Stevie, you're going to stay?"

"He came with a week's business, of course," Charles said. "He's going up to the country with us."

"He darned well certainly is! He isn't going to get away again for— Oh, Hatch! She held the fat man's hand while she introduced him. Hatch hulked over his chair, squinting one eyebrow to cock a sight at Stevie, and rumbled an acknowledgment.

"I keep Hatch only for laughs," Louise explained. "And Mr. Ireland, Mr. Erling. Mr. Ireland's a detective."

Mr. Erling shook hands, always smiling, his eyes hidden by the creased fat of his smile. His clothes were awry, with a fat man's sloppiness: a string of his necktie hung out of his vest, and the white cuffs of his shirt-sleeves slid down to ride on his pudgy hands.

"Ireland," the fat man said, with his ebullient smile. "You did a job for Ulco."

"Steve is the eyes of business," Charles said. "And that reminds me, Mr. Ireland, Harold's been saying he heard something."

"Now, really, Charles," Mrs. Bregan said, "it isn't exactly necessary to run to Mr. Ireland with everything Harold says. If you hadn't been drinking, you'd have—"

"I heard Harold say it too," Louise said. "Why shouldn't we tell Mr. Ireland?"

Ireland said: "Where is he?"

"Probably packing now," Charles said, ignoring his wife. "You can find their room?"

Ireland said he could, and left them.

THE ONCE GREAT ROOMS of the house had been cut up by Dr. Pine into small suites and bedrooms. The large dining-room on the first floor was now sleeping-rooms, dressing-rooms and baths, all facing on a short passage that opened beyond the curtail-step of the ex-grand stairway, now closed.

Passing through the drawing-room, Ireland had the feeling of something out of place, and stopped to survey the room. Piano, bench pushed out as Harold had left it; ash-trays unemptied about the room; Miami had gathered up the cocktail clasp, but had missed a glass someone had left on the floor at the end of the couch.

He started on again, swung around on his heel and studied the room once more with minute attention.

The white magnificence of the fireplace, untouched by fire; the mounted birds in every corner; the wall-eyed white-tail; the ice-axes. . . .

Two steps carried him to the fireplace. He went up on a chair to examine the wall above the mantel, the staples and loops of wire where the ice-axes had hung.

One of them was gone.

Ireland dropped down from the chair and walked with long strides through the library, past the foot of the staircase, down the corridor to Harold's door.

Isabella answered his knock, in a brassière and step-ins and transparent wrapper. She looked ethereally blonde and lovely, and smelled of fragrant powder. The classic etherealism of a nymph, and therefore slender and supple and nude as a matter of course.

She said: "Oh, Mr. Ireland! I thought it was Harold."

"Where is he?"

"Why, I don't— What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Where will I find him?"

"Something is wrong! What is it?" Stark fright leaped from the depths of her eyes, and she clutched the negligée around her, and the cords of her neck stood forth when she spoke.

"What's up?" George Morey called, a shadowy figure limping down the dimly lit passage toward them.

"Nothing," Ireland said. "I'm looking for Mr. Jeans."

"I saw him awhile ago, some place. He was saying something about hearing—"

Ireland coursed through the first floor, took the stairway and looked into the darkness of the second and third floors on his way up to the top, went to his own room and got a powerful five-cell flashlight from his bag, returned to the middle floors and went through them painstakingly, working the brilliant beam of his light over each sheeted piece of furniture, every dusty mounted bird and beast.

HAROLD HAD TAKEN THE ICE-AX himself, certainly. He had heard something, and he had taken the ice-ax for a weapon and gone to investigate—possibly to the basement, possibly to the roof. Ireland had forgotten the roof, the flat roof with its concealing skylights and chimneys and ventilators and darkness.

Just the place for a shrike: the roof.

In the basement Miami had her apartment with her husband, an aged colored man named Janus, whose exact status in the household was uncertain, and who never showed himself above-stairs.

He came forth at the probe of Ireland's light, asking: "Whut you want?"

Ireland said: "Have you seen anyone down here?"

"Seen anyone? Nossuh, I aint seen anyone. I just now got home. I been out visiting around. Is it someone wanting me?"

Ireland threw open the door that gave on the courtyard behind the house. The night was windy and starless, and back here there was little light from the streets, only faint illumination from the tiers of lighted windows in the surrounding buildings.

The beam of his flashlight lanced about the yard, picking out the skeletal ribs of the tall iron spikes against the black backdrop of the courtyard wall. The beam was a wavering finger nervously seeking a place on a page, and it found it and came to rest.

Behind him Ireland heard the old man say: "Oh, God A'mighty! God Merciful A'mighty!"

"Get Dr. Pine on the house phone, will you?" Ireland said. "Tell him to come down here right away."

He followed the path of light over to Harold, hanging on the fence.

Harold's face was a mask of blood, and there was blood clotted in his hair. He had been hung to one of the fence-spikes by the slack of his coat. The coat had slipped, and now his feet sagged to the paving of the court.

His body was warm. Ireland ran his hand inside the coat and felt the pulse of his heart. He was alive. Ireland threw his shoulder under him to lift him down, and the flashlight slipped in his hand, and something flashed a dull reflection to the corner of his vision.

It was a small gray bird. It clung with wired feet to its perch on a neighboring spike, swaying a little in the wind and looking unblinkingly into the light with a black glass eye.

CHAPTER FIVE



SUNLIGHT filled the Avenue and storekeepers sat on crates on the sidewalk with their eyes closed, in a rite of noon in spring. Yudy's Bar and Grill, a combination Dickensian inn and Bavarian *biertube* concealed between a red A. & P. store and an onyx-and-silver drugstore, drowsed behind its leaded windows and stucco front. Yudy loafed yawning behind the bar with a magazine. Joe Schultz sat in a corner booth with a ham sandwich and a Coca-Cola. Between bites he wrote in a large looseleaf notebook.

Ireland came in, and Yudy saluted him with a slight lift of his eyebrows and went on reading.

"Sammy," Joe said with his mouth full, "howsa boy?"

"All right, Joe," Ireland said. He hung up his hat and sat down across the shiny table. He got out a nickel and started the juke-box.

"You look kind of crocked," Joe said, over the boom of music. He munched his sandwich. "What's on the docket?"

"A woman named Bertha Arriven," Ireland said. He spelled out the name. Joe wrote in his notebook. When he made a mistake, he sought in the briefcase at his feet for an ink-eraser and corrected it. "Committed to the Brooks, a private hospital for the insane, in August, 1927." Joe wrote a peculiar personal shorthand; there was nothing fast about it, but it had its virtue in that no one could read it but himself. "Attending psychiatrist, Dr. John B. Greenleaf, — Park Avenue. Private nurse at the Brooks for nine years, Mrs. Virginia Thorn, Innes, Long Island. That's the hospital address."

"The booby-trap?"

"Yes. When Bertha Arriven entered this hospital, her description was as follows: age, twenty-nine; height, five feet five inches; weight, one one four; build, medium slim, slightly stoop-shouldered; complexion, dark; hair, brown, thick, curly, worn long with pins; eyes, iris-brown to brown-yellow, intent expression from near-sightedness, no glasses; eyebrows, noticeable slant, short-haired, unpenciled; nose, small, straight; face, peg-top; neck, long; lips, slightly upturned upper; mouth, large; ears, small, upper helix acute angle in rear; forehead, high; freckles, faint on forearms and bridge of nose. Here are three photographs of her. Get a set of her fingerprints from the hospital, if you can.

"She was discharged from the Brooks in December, 1936. On December twenty-one, same year she entered the Cleve Hill Hospital, Manhattan. Fractured pelvis. Traffic accident involving taxicab. Cab-driver, Domenico Triulio. Attending physician, Dr. Uitt Romney, — Park Avenue."

"Same address as the other butcher," Joe remarked.

"That's right. Discharged from the Cleve Hill"—the juke-box stopped, and Ireland fed it another nickel—"in May, 1937, to the Cleveland Park Hotel. Checked out of the hotel in June, same year, to no address."

"Okay," Joe said. "And you want her, hey?"

"Find her if you can. Get everything on her you can."

"But quick, hey?"

"Don't spare the pistons," Ireland said. The juke-box blared with a screaming trumpet and a pounding drum. Ireland's nerves danced to it.

"Special angles?"

"Yes—any particular changes in her appearance that you can pick up along the way. Another thing, Joe. Know anything about ornithology?"

"Never heard of her."

Ireland said: "Well—"

"Just kidding, Sam. I go to a bird-walk club with the kids." Schultz laughed and slapped his leg.

Ireland grinned. "Joe the Schmaltz. . . . I want you to get me a couple of fresh-killed shrikes if you can—butcher-birds. Try the pet-shops, museums, anyone in the animal line—someone ought to be able to get them for you. I'll pay fifty bucks apiece."

"Shrikes," Joe said, scratching his chin. "I don't know. They aint common."

"Well, see what you can do."

"Yep, that's always good." Joe capped his pen and put it away. "That's the story, Sam? Then I'll get on my horse."

"I'll keep in touch with you, Joe."

Joe placed a white felt hat on the exact top of his head, gathered up his briefcase and lifted a hand in salute and left the booth, a little, intent man, monkey-faced and leathery, with an energetic, loping gait. He stopped at the bar to pay Yudy for his lunch. In a moment he returned to the booth.

He leaned over Ireland and said: "There's an out-of-place broad in the front booth; she belong to you?" He went away again, whistling, the briefcase swinging to the gallop of his step.

The juke-box stopped, and Ireland did not need to start it again. He got his hat and moved toward the door, and saw Hebe seated in the first booth, spooning up a dish of ice-cream. She was wearing a thin black dusty coat, and her gray hair straggled out from under a black straw hat. She looked dowdy and old; her cheeks were flushed in her pale face, and her eyes were guilty at Ireland's appearance.

She said with the haste of confession: "Mr. Ireland, I—"

"We'd better go on out," Ireland said. He waited for her at the door while she fumbled in her purse for change.

As the salt of the sea, Ireland thought, so is suspicion seasoned in fear. And as with salt water, the more you swallow of suspicion, the thirstier you become.

IN THE DAZZLING SUN of the street, walking toward the park, Hebe trotting two steps to Ireland's one, she said: "I had to talk to you alone, Mr. Ireland, so I—I followed you out this morning."

"(I had to check up on you, Mr. Ireland," Ireland thought wryly; "I'm afraid, and I'm afraid of everyone, and perhaps I'm more afraid of you than anyone, because now Uncle Hector has told you why I am afraid.")

Hebe gave him a quick distressed glance, as if she heard this conversation with herself.

She said: "I am so frightened, Mr. Ireland, after the terrible—the terrible thing that has happened. Because I do have a conscience, you see, and because I—because I—and so of course—" Her tongue darted out timidly and ran over her lips. "I feel more than any of them."

Ireland said: "I don't follow you, Mrs. Morey."

She didn't answer. They stood at the corner waiting for the light to change. Across the street schoolgirls with scarves around their heads ran in and out of the park, and nursemaids wheeled caravans of carriages among them, and an elderly peanut-vendor shifted from foot to foot by his stand, as world-weary as a lamp-post. The life of the children and the flashing white shoes of the nursemaids and the glisten and roar of the passing cars were the colors of blossoms nodding in their season: the old man alone was alive and aware and discontent.

Ireland said: "Do you want a cab?"

"No. No. I want to talk to you. And it is such a beautiful day."

They crossed the street, and Ireland bought a sack of peanuts.

The park was clad in the virginal green of spring; early wild flowers bloomed from the bank along the path; a

robin flew into a tree, nest-building material streaming behind him. Ireland tossed his peanuts at squirrels as they walked along.

"What I—" Hebe began in her gentle voice, and said instead, "Why I feel—" and stopped again, breathing vexedly through her nose. She would talk more freely with her knitting in her hands, Ireland thought. She said at last: "Just what did Dr. Romney say about Harold? You talked to him."

"A glancing blow on the parietal bone," Ireland said. "Concussion, but no fracture."

"He's in—he's in no danger at all?"

"Well, he's pretty sick. But he should come out of it."

"And what—what was it done with? George said he heard Charles say one of Uncle Hector's—one of those ice-axes in the—"

"Probably. We don't know."

TWO OR THREE SQUIRRELS were following them now. One was a sorry-looking individual, great patches of his fur gone and his tail almost naked. Ireland aimed peanuts at him, and the healthier squirrels knocked him aside and beat him out of them.

Hebe padded along, oblivious to the squirrels, huddled in her homely coat and muffler and hat, oblivious to everything outside her worrying thoughts.

She said: "Now that Uncle Hector has told you about Bertha, you—you know, of course, and—big—"

"I'm afraid I don't know much," Ireland said. "You might be able to give me some background on it."

"Why—yes—yes, if I can. What do you mean?"

"The curse of the Bryndels," Ireland said. "The girl children who die young."

"Why, I don't know. . . . Did Uncle Hector say that? I don't know that it's any curse. I mean, May is an orphan, and her mother was orphaned at an early age, but—they're not even Bryndels, to be entirely accurate. It's always spoken of as the Bryndel fortune, but that's only because of Aunt Sibyl Bryndel, who was the first heir."

"Aunt Sibyl was Dr. Pine's sister?"

"Yes. There were four girls and Uncle Hector in the family. Aunt Sibyl was my grandfather's favorite, and he left nine-tenths of his wealth to her, and"—the pursed-up smile appeared again—"that's really all that matters in the family history."

"Aunt Sibyl's daughter was raised with—with Bertha Arriven. Almost as a sister. She married a scientist and died in India, in a cholera epidemic, if I remember. It took both her and her husband. And her little girl was left then with Bertha—until Bertha's—until her sickness; then when she was grown, she married an engineer named Descartes, and May was born; then two years ago, when the child was only a year old, poor baby, her parents were lost in the Atlantic. They were both in war work and they were on their way to England."

"So May's name, of course, is May Descartes; the Bryndel is nothing at all but the name of Aunt Sibyl's husband, and a horrid loud sort he was, I remember. He had a red face and a square beard, and he took his fancy ladies with him in a carriage to attend the races; but the name has stuck. May is always called May Bryndel Descartes. All the Bryndels have always kept the name."

"Bertha wasn't a Bryndel?"

"Oh, no. Goodness, no. Well, as a matter of fact, she was a very distant relative, I think, of Mr. Bryndel's, but it was never considered that she was connected with the family in any way. Aunt Sibyl took her in to be a companion to her daughter, something of that sort, when they were children, when Bertha and Sibyl's daughter were children, I mean; they all lived in the house then; the house only came to Uncle Hector after Aunt Sibyl's death, but the Bryndels have always lived there, as far as that is concerned. . . . Bertha—Uncle Hector thinks because she knows the house, she—she would be able—"

Hebe became exasperated with her clumsy tongue and said in a burst of words: "I can't *believe* it was possible that Bertha was in the house yesterday. We have all been so careful. It has been like living in a fortress. I—I simply can't—Mr. Ireland, have you thought that it might *not* have been Bertha?" She was appalled at what she was saying and rushed on: "I mean, please understand that in spite of how incredible it may seem, I can't help but be certain that it was she, simply because I did know her and I know—but it is only because I am so certain and it is so—so terrifying to think that, that I—that I keep trying to convince myself that it must have been something else, *anyone* else, some quarrel, something, because Harold *is* so—everyone in the family dislikes him so, not that it is exactly the poor boy's fault. . . . And of course you understand about Isabella—" Her pale eyes ventured up to see what he made of this.

Ireland obliged. "Isabella?"

"She is—oh, I suppose it's only being modern, if you—I mean, she—she isn't at all faithful to Harold."

"I'm glad to know that," Ireland said gravely.

Again she chanced a glance. "I should have thought you would have guessed. After all, she is thoroughly honest about—that is, she *is* bold and entirely uninhibited, and one *does* like her. But mercy, I don't understand modern morals, I don't pretend to. But about Harold, there is—there is Charles—"

"Charles?"

"She—she has been having an affair with Charles. Oh, yes. And Charles is—he can have quite a violent temper; you'd never know; but he—and Laura too; she is Charles' second wife, you know, and she had very tawdry beginnings, in spite of the grand manner she has made an effort to acquire; Louise simply despises her—certainly it will be only a matter of time until Charles is divorced. They have been on the point of it for ages. I know I am not modern, but it seems so *callous*. I am sure I should regard divorce with more horror than any death. The Bible, you know. As the wild free golden eagle mates for life—Uncle Hector says it does, and I've always remembered—so—"

"I don't know why I'm talking like this to you, Mr. Ireland. It is only because, I suppose, I must wish so much to feel that it *must* not be Bertha."

Her breath failed her, and she whispered: "Anything at all, but Bertha."

They went on awhile in silence. Half a dozen squirrels ran now in their wake, leaping along the sides of the path, the hairless squirrel lagging dejectedly in the rear.

"I'm afraid I can't think today," Hebe said, "to make you understand what is in my wretched mind. Do you know Dryden, Mr. Ireland?"

*"Through sense and nonsense, never out nor in:
Free from all meaning, whether good or bad . . ."*

Ireland said, "Do you write poetry, Mrs. Morey?"

"Oh, only—trifles."

Ireland walked beside her, soberly flipping peanuts over his shoulder.

PEOPLE CONTINUED TO ASTONISH HIM. What did he expect? His disillusionment, then, excited the compassion he resented. What was there to pity about Hebe? A frustrated old bag with plenty of money; who was to blame for her frustration? Her frustration that fed her fear. Her emotionalism that fed her suspicion. The one devoured the other, and the excretion was her own small portion of evil for the world, and she wept and chanted over it. Ireland liked her and was deeply sorry for her.

"Hear that bird," Hebe said. "Uncle Hector would know what it is. It seems to be following us."

Ireland left her a moment and walked back to the underprivileged squirrel, coaxing it with a peanut. The squirrel backed away from him and as Ireland came

nearer showed its teeth in a snarl and ran away behind a tree, and a sleek squirrel with a wealth of bushy tail took the peanut from Ireland's fingers. Ireland was aroused to anger, and threw the remainder of the sack of peanuts at the bushy-tailed squirrel, causing it too to leap for cover, and went on, out of humor with himself, to catch up with Hebe.

The bird called again in the bushes beyond them, a plaintive note like a squeaky tin whistle.

CHAPTER SIX



AT the door to Harold's room Ireland raised his hand to knock and held it there. A woman was crying, under the whiplash of Dr. Pine's angry voice.

"Death? It can be worse than death for him, if you persist in being a damned brainless little idiot. Who's at the door? Someone's out there. Well, go and see!"

Ireland opened the door.

Isabella was sitting beside Harold's bed, her eyes red, tears on her cheeks, her breathing distraught with sobs. Harold, his head heavily bandaged, appeared to be sleeping. Dr. Pine was standing at the foot of the bed. His chin wobbled, and he chewed strenuously and glared at Ireland.

"I didn't hire you to spy on me, young man. I've got good hearing. Don't do it again."

Ireland said to Isabella: "What's the trouble?"

"He—" Isabella shook her head miserably, and scrubbed at her cheeks with her knuckles.

"She sent for the police," Dr. Pine snapped.

Ireland looked at him and said flatly: "That's right. I told her to."

"Didn't I tell you I did not want the police here? You told her to, by God! Did I employ you for—"

"It's my business to keep the law," Ireland pointed out. "When that interferes with my clients' best interests, my clients can go to hell. There was an attempted murder here last night. I'm not allowed to accept alone the responsibility of investigation of a crime of that nature. That's farther along than I can go with you. If you don't like it that way, you'd better get another boy."

Dr. Pine reached up with a flabby big-knuckled hand and slapped his wig sideways on his head. Rage worked in his faded eyes behind his glasses.

He said: "You were with the police when they were here this morning, Mr. Ireland?"

"I was."

"What did they say?"

"The Lieutenant's opinion was that Mr. Jeans' wife beat him up."

Isabella gasped.

The old man said: "And the shriek?"

"The Lieutenant spoke of a case up in Harlem where the wife knocked out the husband with a dictionary, and placed candles at his head and feet and glued a crucifix upright on his nose. It's the Lieutenant's opinion that the higher and lower you go in the economic scale, the more similar behavior-patterns appear."

"And Bertha's letters?"

"The Lieutenant said that if he had a nickel for every crank that writes threatening letters to millionaires, he would be a millionaire himself."

"And did he talk to Harold?"

"Harold couldn't remember what had happened." He looked in inquiry at Isabella, and she said: "He's been awake, but he has only talked a little."

Dr. Pine said: "And what is this Lieutenant going to do?"

"Unless Harold wants to prefer charges against his wife or whoever assaulted him, nothing. No one has signed a

complaint. He offered to assign a cop for protection. I told him you didn't want any."

The old man laughed. He sat down on the foot of the bed, cackling delightedly. Ireland grinned. Isabella looked dumfounded.

"Everybody's got more brains than I give 'em credit for," Dr. Pine said, still cackling, and got up and cuffed his wig straight and fumbled his way to the door.

Ireland said: "You'll be glad to know the Lieutenant said he'd keep it out of the papers."

"Pah! Police are in the papers' pay, all of them; how else does the press get the garbage it prints?"

He went out and slammed the door.

Isabella smiled weakly. "He's such a darned old fool!"

Isabella's mask, her amused and satirical mask, was gone. Her face was pale without make-up; her long yellow hair was uncombed; there were shadows under her eyes, and her eyes were soft with weeping. She had given no thought today to her clothes; she was wearing a plaid skirt and an unpressed blouse, and her legs were bare. There was nothing now in her mind, Ireland felt, but Harold; she could not keep her eyes from his sleeping face; and her long hands, smoothing the sheets, were gentle and lingering. There was devotion in her every attitude. Ireland found it puzzling.

He said: "How is he now?"

"The Doctor said he should be all right soon. He said he should sleep."

She smiled at Harold's face, half hidden under bandaging, and possibly even more foolish in sleep than in life.

"Uncle Hector is hoping he'll be well enough tomorrow night to go to the country. He's wild to get away from here, and to get Harold away. He said if only we had left six hours earlier—yesterday afternoon—the minute he found out about those shrieks, this would never have happened."

She sighed and turned the wedding-ring idly on her finger, and pressed the back of her hand against her cheek, and looked on Harold with lambent eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN the nursery, Ireland found May and Miss Peabody at lunch. May was overtaken with a strange shyness, and beamed at him while some mashed potato escaped her spoon and slid down her chin.

"Hello, Irish," Miss Peabody said. "Have some coffee with us?"

"I can't refuse," Ireland said. Miss Peabody got up to bring another cup. Ireland looked at May without expression, and she gazed back at him. He winked at her, and she giggled, and choked on a piece of bread. Miss Peabody, returning to the table, slapped her back in passing, and May swallowed the bread and giggled again.

"Don't look at him too long," Miss Peabody said. "He's black Irish, and he'll turn into a wolf." She cut a piece of cake for Ireland and smiled winsomely for him and said: "That's what my mother used to say."

"Peabody," Ireland said, and took a great bite of cake, "you'll give the kid a complex."

She passed him another piece of cake. "She's entirely too trusting. Why, she hardly knows you. Only one other person ever fascinated her so."

"I'm in," Ireland said. "Who?"

"The orang-utan at the zoo."

May broke the ice and said: "The monkeys, in the zoo."

"Nice bunch of fellows," Ireland said. Miss Peabody cut him another piece of cake. "Peabody," Ireland said, "when you grow up, I'm going to take you out some night. We'll go to dinner at Joseph's, and see a show, and have a couple of highballs some place." He favored her with open approval, and she dimpled wantonly and gave

him more cake. "You're a ripe, unopened bud," Ireland pronounced.

"Will you make a pass at me in the taxicab?"

"Does it have to be in a taxicab?"

"I've heard they used to, in your day." She rested her chin on her hand and looked at him with musing melancholy. "And I'll bet you Charleston too. Imagine!"

The little girl said: "Sam's silly."

"She calls people by their first names," Ireland said. "Is that the present practice?"

"It's just easier," Peabody said. "She's got so many great-uncles and great-aunts and great-great-this-and-that and so forth. I don't see why children owe so much respect to adults, anyway. In many ways they're much nicer people than grown-ups. If they're vicious little brutes, at least it's entirely honest. When they start getting affected and nasty, well, then they're growing up. Have some more cake. Please!"

"Have some more cake," May said. "Please!"

It occurred to Ireland that these two, May and Helen, were worth a great deal to each other; rich children customarily see more of Nanny than Mammy; but in this case Nanny was the works, father, mother, the family unit. If May missed her parents, it wasn't visible; probably the kid believed all families consisted of only Helens. And as far as Peabody was concerned, May was undeniably a very good thing financially, apart from any sentiment at all. Her salary, Ireland had understood from Dr. Pine, was out of the nursemaid bracket; only the super de luxe price-range for May; a good thing indeed for a girl of—How old was Peabody—nineteen, twenty?

But a lonely life for both of them, in this household.

"You look terrible," Helen said. "Didn't you get any sleep at all last night?"

"That's what I came in for," Ireland said. "I want to get some sleep tonight." He took a short-barreled revolver, a model known as the Bankers' Special, out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Keep that on you. All the time! Now I mean all the time, Peabody. Are you afraid of it?"

"No. I know how to shoot."

"Well, don't hesitate to use it. It's a small caliber, but it's a hollow-point bullet and it can do some damage. Enough. Don't take any chances."

"Do you think I would?"

Ireland said: "What I'm getting at, is that that goes for everybody, including the people in this house."

"Isn't that being a little—"

"Well, you let me be the judge of that. If anyone—anyone at all—acts out of line in any way—any way at all—around that kid, don't wait to talk it over. Shoot for the kneecap."

"You sound as if you really think—"

"I'm not thinking," Ireland said. "I'm worrying."

"But it's seemed to me that now that crazy woman has actually got in and—actually done something, that she might be satisfied, and anyway, afraid to come back again, with everyone here stirred up now and watching. Isn't there anything to that?"

"Could be," Ireland said abstractedly. It was a pretty theory, out of Psychology II, where theories looked pretty, in black and white, in books. But books didn't tell you how to get in locked houses. Ireland took the last piece of cake, and showed Helen the pistol's safety, and explained that the hammer rested on an empty chamber, and finished the cake and got up.

"Good-by," May said. "Come see me again."

"I'll do that."

He went out, leaving Miss Peabody at the table looking thoughtfully at the little gun shining in her hand.

The thing was, he could put his finger on nothing but feelings, and in this house of nerves he was getting nerves himself.

A series of threatening letters, the gift of a dead shrike, the theft of two mounted shrikes, an attack with an ice-ax, in the course of which the attacker had gone to some trouble and risk to affix one of the stolen shrikes to the scene of the crime—Dr. Pine had identified the specimen as one of the pair taken from his study—these were the facts. Or were they?

An ice-ax? The weapon hadn't been found.

An attempted murder? Harold had looked bloody enough, butchered enough and dead enough.

BUT THESE WERE GUESSES, not facts. Bertha Arriven had gone mad; that was fact. She had disappeared eight years ago. She lived—somewhere—in hate of this family. Charles and his wife were facing divorce over Isabella. Dr. Pine feared the police. These were facts, or nearer facts—beliefs if not realities.

He went from the nursery to Kistry's kitchen on the top floor, and asked Kistry for any old letters or writings of Bertha Arriven's and Kistry obligingly searched in the cluttered filing closet near Dr. Pine's study.

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "There's ever' old thing in here, but I wouldn't know her writing if I saw it. Oh, no, looky, here's that picture used to hang in the nursery. It's a picture of her, and it's got writing on it."

Ireland studied the photograph, an enlarged snapshot, the poorest of the several pictures he had seen of Bertha. On the back was written:

Dearest Kathie:

Here's an awful picture of your Aunt Bertha. But I am getting better, dear, even if I don't look it, and although I still have to take those nasty shots. You must send some nice wild raspberries down from the farm, and I won't be so thin when you get back.

In the corner of the photograph was printed: "July, 1927."

Ireland said: "This will be fine. . . . Do you know who Kathie was?"

"No, now I don't. . . . Now wait. . . . I think that's what they called little May's mother when she was a little girl. It does seem to me I've heard the Doctor speak the name."

Ireland thanked her and took the photograph to his own room and left it with the envelope of letters.

July, 1927. A month before she went to the asylum. She was sick; apparently had been sick for some time. It was not sudden, then. He wondered if Bertha had known then what kind of sickness it was. Probably. Mental illness was not improved by deceiving the patient.

He went downstairs in the elevator. For no reason at all but a feeling of apprehension—feelings—he stopped the elevator at the third and second floors and looked into their emptiness.

Ireland walked through the corner of the library downstairs, and Charles and the fat man, Mr. Erling, stopped talking while he passed. Charles nodded, and the fat man smiled, concealing his eyes, and nodded like a mechanical doll until Ireland was gone.

Ireland went on down the back stairs to the basement, and for the third time examined the basement corridor for blood stains. . . . Nothing.

In the courtyard there were the few sprinkled drops of blood that he had found earlier; no definite pattern, no clear path, only an indication that Harold had been dragged, bleeding, from the general direction of the house to the general direction of the black fence and its row of spikes.

He would know something, perhaps, when Harold woke and remembered.

He considered the rear wall of the house. The first-floor windows were some sixteen feet above the courtyard floor.

It was simple, of course. The shrike had merely enticed Harold to one of those windows, perhaps the window of Harold's own room, which faced on this court, and had then reached in and grabbed him and flung him over to the fence!

Ireland lit a cigarette, studying the windows, the basement door, the adjacent houses. The adjacent houses were empty. Most of the austere town houses in this neighborhood were empty, with boarding around the fronts and modest signs announcing *For Sale*.

So Bertha had soared over the surrounding houses and buildings to alight in the courtyard—and had soared through a window into the house to get the ice-ax—and had soared out again to clip Harold with it—

Ireland swore, and grinned without humor, and dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. . . .

He went back inside the house, and Miami stopped him in the back hall.

"Mr. Ireland," she said in a lowered voice, "I been looking for you." She glanced up and down the hall furtively. "You come along here."

She led him to the drawing-room. She stood there, peering about, and saw Charles and Stevie still in conference in the library, and went over and closed the library door. She was perspiring.

"Now you do something," she directed. "You stand on that chair and jump down, just as quiet as you can."

Ireland stepped up on a chair and dropped to the floor.

"Now"—she grunted with the effort of climbing up on the chair—"you listen." She hopped down in turn, and the floor vibrated to her weight.

"When a man jump," she said, breathing hard and fixing Ireland with a round-eyed look, "he light one way; and when a woman jump, she light another way, now aint that so? Well, last night I was cleaning up in yonder, and someone turned out the lights in this room—and I never do that, long as folks are up—so I did think it was Miss Bregan and Mr. Hatch—you know how young people will do. But just when I was thinking that, I heard them talking right in the pantry, so I knew they couldn't be in here.

"So I thought, there's something funny about that, and I looked this way here and listened, but I couldn't see no one, and the lights just stayed out, and then I heard that little jump—like I said, a woman jumps and lights one way, with a *bump-bump*, because a woman's always got a knockkneed way of jumping, and besides she wears heels—*pdmp!*—like that. And a man, he jumps just *thmp*, like that, kind of soft, because he's springy. And so what I heard, it was *pdmp!*—someone jumping on the floor, quiet as could be, and the next minute the lights here came back on, but from where I was, I couldn't see a soul.

"Now they have been saying it was one of these little axes like this one that that crazy woman come in and took—and I most certainly don't know a thing about her; I only been here three years. And I don't know if she got in or if she did, how she went about to do it, or anything about her. But I will just say I'd be willing to swear that was a woman jumped in here last night when those lights was off, and if that wasn't the time that ax was taken away, then I don't know what the lights was doing turned off and on like that."

WHAT TIME WAS THAT?" asked Ireland.

"I couldn't say just for certain, but it was after dinner, when everybody had got all upset and rushing around about getting ready to catch the midnight train all of a sudden. Now maybe I wouldn't swear to God to it, and maybe I would, but I'm just as honest certain as standing here that it was a woman, and I thought you ought to know."

Ireland went back upstairs in the elevator, again stopping at the middle floors. When he looked out of the

elevator on the third floor, he was startled to see a pair of shapely feminine legs, ankles crossed, extending over the arm of a sheeted chair. The back of the chair prevented him from seeing whose legs they were.

He said: "Hey!"

Hatch and Louise looked around the other side of the chair-back.

"Oh," Louise said. Her face was brown and piquant. "We're looking for that ice-ax."

Hatch got up, dumping Louise off his lap; she kicked her feet in protest, and he quieted her by placing a large hand on the top of her head and gently pushing down. He said in his gravelly voice to Ireland: "Something up?"

"As you were," Ireland said, and closed the elevator door and went on up to the top floor and his room, and a comparison of the printing in the shrike-woman's letters with the handwriting of Bertha Arriven on the photograph. Someone was in his room when he entered, and he jumped back involuntarily, his hand striking inside his coat to the shoulder holster against his ribs. It was Kistry, making his bed. She in her turn squealed at his sudden appearance, dropping the pillow under her chin, and then laughed, declaring that she was getting so jumpity she couldn't live with herself. Her eyes were sparkling behind the bluish lenses of her glasses, and Ireland detected about her a strong odor of good whisky.

She finished her work and went out, and Ireland settled himself with the letters, and went to sleep over them.

CHAPTER EIGHT



FROM the notebook of Hector Pine, Ph.D.
Tuesday:

We know so much and understand so little. To know is common, to understand sublime.

This is a time of patient inquisitive observant men, and these men are not given to free thought; but they toil without end in the mesh of cataloguing. Give us, God, a man who can think in scope! What such a man, or race of men, could not accomplish!

For example, we know the primitive Americans smoked tobacco in pipes, or cigars, or cigarettes, or took snuff, or chewed tobacco; and where they had not tobacco, they chewed cocoa (leaves of the cocoa tree, from which is obtained the alkaloid cocaine. . . . This drug was in common use, before the coming of the European, among the natives of Pacific South America).

Now let us seek to understand this bit of knowledge.

Is it rooted in man's nature to seek escape from his surroundings, wherever and whatever he may be? Is this the boon of his higher consciousness?

Man has always looked for gods; man alone among the beasts has buried his dead; man alone has gone to war with nature.

What is the meaning of this restlessness, then (to be found, if we shall say it is, in the most primeval of men), this torment of inspiration we cannot comprehend, this urge to flee that which is about us, to fight that which suckles us, to destroy that which loves us?

We do not understand.

But there are the simple matters that we have observed and classified and catalogued until we know them better than our own noses. The melodies of songbirds—men have listened to them with rapture for millenniums. We classify the song as a secondary sexual character; we know birds have a language, and that these are the burning words of courtship; and sentimental birders can even translate them into words in our own uncouth lingua, and get so expert at it that there's really no great reason at all why they can't swoop around the fields in little airplanes and sing perchance-to-me-my-thrilling-thrilling-one-of-love and mate with goldfinches. But of what, in

this, are we *sure*? That the songbird sings with a joyous abandon, with a glorious happiness? I think so, and the weight of opinion thinks so, but to the man who is *sure*, I say nonsense. How do we know the songbird is *not* screaming from hunger? It's in the morning before they've had their breakfast, that they yell the most.

As someone has said, the last word of science will end not with a period but a question-mark.

Mankind probably knows more and understands less than any other creature. Why? The lower faunas understand by instinct, and their horizons are limited. The earthworm eats his way through the soil and leaves topsoil in his wake; and man appears and in a few centuries with careless methods of farming (according to the Department of Agriculture) allows this precious A-horizon to wash away, the age-old work of billions of earthworms. The earthworm's work was good, and the man's was bad. I must conclude that the earthworm is a hell of a lot wiser than the man. This is an allegory for a number of things.

We have learned rules for living together, but we do not understand the use of them. We are as far from the face of the God of rational society as were the Greeks at the Scaean gates. More! We culture an even greater crop of murderers and harlots and poor persecuted bastards of all kinds. As our civilization advances, may we not expect even more? And the merry hell with understanding? Because understanding aint practical?

Perhaps understanding, like hope, is garbed in different raiment for each of us, and the trouble therefore merely one of communication; we cannot communicate our understanding any better than our hopes. How tongue-tied the most eloquent become when addressing hope!

The detective Ireland looks not for knowledge first, but for understanding (of human emotions, in his case); whence will proceed the knowledge he desires. In this he is astute, and my respect for him has grown.

He was right about the police lieutenant. We were indeed kept out of the papers. To what account? Ireland is no fool. But what can I say?

Why must I think of this thing?

Was I simple enough to think she would sometime forgive?

What is to be done? For May I have trusted this detective. But he has no realization of what he faces.

Must go to the farm tomorrow—must go—if we have to leave Harold behind—whatever happens. On the farm we will be safe. . . .

Only Ireland joined the company downstairs for dinner that evening, but was late, taking the moment of their gathering around the board to case their rooms.

Harold and Isabella, staying in their room,—Harold still asleep, Isabella keeping vigil beside him,—had to be by-passed.

In the twin-bedded room belonging to Hebe and George, Ireland was not surprised to find an Encyclopedia of Sex, "Sex and Marriage," "Sex and the Man," "Sex and the Woman," "Adjusting Yourself to Sex," and "Sex among the Savages." There was also a well-thumbed Bible, but nothing else of interest except George's shoes. The left shoe of each pair was not only deformed in shape but equipped with a massive sole, two and a half inches, according to Ireland's pocket rule, in thickness.

He was about ready to leave the room when he heard George's voice in the hall outside. Ireland swore under his breath and flattened himself against the wall, prepared to slide into the closet at the opening of the door.

The door didn't open, and Ireland became aware that George was talking, in hushed emphatic tones, to Isabella in the corridor.

George too, Ireland thought, lifting his eyebrows; George's tone was unmistakably pitched on a note of passion, half pleading, half bullying, insistent, intimate. Ireland grinned. The little guy had it bad; he was the

kind who would get it bad. "Sex among the Savages" and Isabella. Dynamite! Their voices died, and a door closed and Ireland heard George stump away.

In the Bregan apartment, in the small room doubtless belonging to Louise, Ireland came on the first find of any interest: charred remnants of paper burned in an ash-tray and crushed to powder with a match; the match, blackened end, lay on the edge of the tray. Ireland reflected that the girl had heard somewhere that burned paper could be reconstructed. Or, more reasonably, it had been only a note upon some trivial matter, possibly from Hatch, and she had poked the burning ashes to nothing in idleness, in dreaming, as a schoolboy kicks rocks—

HE WAS MOVING ON when he saw a white corner of paper on the floor, blown under the bed—she had been careless.

It was a triangular scrap of paper, torn across a fold, and on it were three typewritten words:

Harold will, or

Will what? Make trouble? Return your book? Accept with pleasure for Friday night? Or what? The three words had the note of a threat, but they might well mean *Harold will*, or we'll go without him; *Harold will* of his wife won't like it; *Harold will*, or he'll let you know.

Ireland pocketed the fragment of paper and made his way to the room which, so Miami had told him that morning, had been given the new house guest Mr. Erling. Its windows opened on the courtyard, as did the windows of Harold's room, and Ireland stood a moment looking into the gathering dark of the courtyard before turning to Stevie's personal effects.

They were scant.

A folder of business papers, all remarkably unrevealing, laconic references to cryptic matters, mostly concerned with money, serving only to inform him of what he already knew, that Erling and Charles were associated in business of some nature not made clear in these notes—clothespins, copper mines, chain-stores; something.

There was a portable typewriter in the room, and a number of these papers appeared to be copies that might have come from this machine—copies on the letterhead: *Stephen Erling ——— Wall Street*. On a hunch Ireland compared the typing on the scrap in his pocket with a specimen from the fat man's typewriter. He studied the two typescripts with a hand lens. They appeared to be the same. The paper was similar also. It would take a more detailed comparison for certainty, but Ireland was induced to waste another fifteen minutes going carefully over the room for a copy of the burned letter, which he did not find.

In the course of this search, however, he came upon a secret compartment in one of Stevie's traveling bags—secret, that is, according to the manufacturer, but not exactly difficult to find, inasmuch as it opened from a slide fastener in the corner of the bag—and here Ireland found a notebook filled with figures. There was nothing odd about this, except that the figures were in groups of three.

Three-horse parlays? A system for beating the market? Or roulette? He could make nothing of it, replaced the notebook, and left the room at last and went in to dinner.

Hebe and Mrs. Bregan were again discussing a birthday party for Dr. Pinc. It would be nice to give him a well-bound edition of "Pliny's Natural History," Mrs. Bregan thought, for after all, it was a classic; for after all, the Greeks. . . . Hebe murmured that there, she had always thought Pliny was a Roman; mercy, her memory was atrocious. Mrs. Bregan smiled and said but my dear, one simply doesn't forget the Golden Age of Greece: Pliny, Aristotle and Archimedes. Louise, with her father, Hatch, and an occasional word from George, was keeping up a lively argument over whether the shriek-woman had taken the ice-ax with her or left it on the premises. They

made no effort to guard their references to Bertha, Ireland noticed, concluding thereby that Erling, like Hatch, was *ex officio* a member of the family. Stevie listened with a bright interest, his eyes darting from one speaker to another, his eyes constantly smiling behind their rolls of fat, stopping now and again to rest on Louise and light up with pleasure at her answering smile. . . .

In Harold's room an hour later Isabella, sipping coffee and smoking a cigarette, whispered: "He's been getting more wakeful. Don't—" She made a cautioning gesture with her hand, and Ireland entered the room quietly and quietly closed the door.

"The Doctor was here again," Isabella whispered. "He says Harold is doing fine. He says sometimes they're well in a few hours or they might be sick for days, and—"

Harold's eyes came partly open and squinted in pain at the shaded light, and Ireland moved to stand before it.

Harold moved his lips and said: "Isabella."

She put down her coffee, clattering the cup, and hurried to him. She knelt by the bed, holding his hand, murmuring wordless comforting sounds, a song, a lullaby.

"Who is—that?"

"Only Mr. Ireland. He came to see how you were."

After a moment of rest Harold breathed deeply and said: "Did you catch her?"

Isabella said quickly: "Darling, did you see her?"

"No. . . . It was Bertha, wasn't it?"

Ireland moved nearer the bed. "Do you remember what happened?"

Harold's bandaged head turned on the pillow, and pain crawled over his face, and his eyes were self-conscious and disturbed at finding himself thus the center of attention.

He said: "I followed it in the back hall—in the basement—out to the courtyard. . . . I didn't see—"

There was a rap on the door. Isabella, without looking away from her husband's face, said, "Come," and Hebe peered in. Her prim, pursed mouth was trembling with excitement.

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Ireland. I keep—I keep—" She hesitated, as though fearing she might appear ridiculous. "I keep hearing a bird calling, here in the house, right in the back hall or the back stairs, some place—"

Harold opened his eyes wide and said: "Yes, yes, that's it. A bird. A—a whistle."

CHAPTER NINE



IRELAND strode along the shadowy back hall, started down the steep back stairs, and stopped halfway in his descent. The light that usually burned in this stairwell was out. The narrow stairs ran down to a pool of darkness in the basement. He looked down into it, and he thought something moved down there. He brought out the pencil flashlight clipped to his pocket, moved quietly on down to the basement hall and felt his way to the courtyard door. He stood still in the dark, listening. At last he flipped on his light and looked over the door. Locked. Evidently Janus was out visiting around again; there was no sign of him here.

Ireland turned back a few feet along the hall and threw open the door of Miami's apartment. Empty. He listened again. Something seemed to creak on the near-by stairs, and Ireland snapped out his light and ran for them. He stepped on an object that rolled with the drive of his foot, and he sprawled full length on the floor with a crash. He came to his feet, his light sweeping the floor: he had put his foot on a round-handled ice-pick. It was still rolling slowly across the floor, bobbing from a warp in the wood. He grabbed it up by the point and ran on, pounded up the stairs.

At the head of the stairs George Morey was coming toward him at a limping trot.

"Hebe told me," George said, a little out of breath, "something—something frightened her back here. She heard something."

"So did I," Ireland said.

George's pipe was in the corner of his mouth, unlit. His wispy hair was on end, and Ireland saw the shine of sweat on his forehead.

He wondered how George was at whistling.

In the library, under the strong reading lamp, he went over the ice-pick handle for fingerprints. There were none. He dropped the instrument into his pocket and stood for some time in thought, plucking his lip, and went to the kitchen to see Miami.

He found her talking on the house phone.

"All right," she said. "Yes, madam." She was sarcastic. "Yes, indeed, madam."

She slammed down the phone, muttering vehemently to herself. She saw Ireland and said brusquely: "She say for you to come upstairs."

Ireland said: "Who?"

"That Kistry," Miami snapped, flinging a dish-towel on a rack.

"You don't like Kistry," Ireland suggested.

"She such a whale of a biggety one!" Miami jerked the dish-towel off the rack again. She said darkly: "She getting too white for her own good. . . . Dr. Pine, he wants you up on the roof."

The roof was attained by a length of ladder running up through a skylight. Ireland, climbing up, saw Dr. Pine leaning down to him from above, silhouetted against the stars.

"I sat down on this damned thing up here," Dr. Pine said sourly.

He handed Ireland the missing ice-ax.

"Where was it?"

"Right here! Where the hell else? Here beside this wall."

Ireland looked around at the sea of roofs, blocks of black and silver in the starlight, and the diffused glow of the city. He went to the edge of the roof and measured the distance to the roof adjoining: a short jump. He got out his light and went over the roof foot by foot, and returned finally to Dr. Pine. The old man was standing erect, his face upturned to the sky. His wig had slipped to the back of his head.

"I'd like to know," Ireland said, "where this ice-ax comes in, from the shrike's point of view."

"Eh?" Dr. Pine came back to earth from the stars, straightening his wig. "Ax? Why, as Burroughs puts it, with its beak the shrike breaks open its victim's skull and saps on the brains."

Ireland ran his thumb over the deadly steel point of the ax. With little imagination it could become the hooked beak of some giant bird, a five-foot shrike, with great racing pinions that sailed in shadow across the black courtyard, with human eyes and a meager teasing whistle for a call.

"Hear them," the old man said in a hushed voice. His face was again uplifted, and his soul again journeying to the upper air, and his voice was the voice of a pious man stealing a word with God. "Listen to them."

Ireland listened. He heard nothing but the blat and roar of a bus. His ears were attuned to the streets.

"Warblers passing over. Thousands of 'em. Listen!"

Ireland tried to visualize what the old man saw, a sky full of the feathered rush of beating wings, the chirping of a multitude of travelers calling back and forth through the night; a vast world movement, shrouded in the mystery of the ages; caravan to spring, charge on spring, as though they drove spring before them by main force, as though by the vector of their shifting mass they would tilt the earth to their season.

"They're saying sleep, sleep," Dr. Pine murmured softly. "Sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep."



FROM the notebook of Hector Pine, Ph.D.

Thursday:

How rare a wine is country air! Verily, I awoke this morning in a different world, and in it how can I help but become a different being? Why, I could feel myself turning into a creature of sunshine, June grass (just greening; you can still find snow here back in the woods) and benevolence by the time the train went through White River; and when I heard my own spring peepers peeping, at long last, why, then I was humming like a happy insect, like a bumblebee in a red clover bank; you could hear me buzzing clear up on Burke Mountain, and all the people came forth in white robes and clapped their hands, and the milk and honey flowed in welcome.

This morning I was entertained while I dressed with the champagne music of a vesper sparrow, a lovelier singer than the song sparrow (a golden thread of song as to a silver chord) not so lusty, more remote; and an inspired artist with the soul of a business man. He mounts his pedestal and sings his shift, and then goes about his business. This morning a rival singer drove him on to overtime. I could not have been more excited if it had been a roseate spoonbill there at the corner of the mowing, rather than this familiar singer; it is perhaps the most moving event of my life each year, my first spring greeting on the farm. This genus (*Pooecetes*), the vesper sparrow, arrived in plenitude down in New York nearly a month ago, but I dare say this little fellow has not long been with us up here in northern Vermont, so have I overhauled the ebbing winter.

Kistry (she was stopped to the gills on the trip, as usual; I swear by the living Mother of Jesus, I am not going to put up with her forever; and she was in the field early this morning, to assuage my temper with a hasty report) tells me the bronzed grackles are back in the old cemetery on the hill—what an exotic feeling one can gain from the simple observation of ecological modification! Yesterday I was in the far-off land of the purple grackles; now I have come to the northern temples of the highland gods, the wind-washed hills of the bronzed grackles. Some of the friends I left behind I will not see until I return: even the whippoorwill, abundant all about us, does not come quite to this altitude; we are too high for the brown thrasher, the house wren and the wood thrush (generally), although the hermit thrush, like the notes of Pan, is every place about me whenever I enter my woods; and the least flycatcher, the chebec (*Empidonax minimus*) that other good neighbor, like the house wren, is for the great part left below.

Ike tells me the winter was unusually hard. He reports a sight observation of a great snowy owl last December; not here; he was driving over west of Montpelier. But it does not necessarily have to be colder weather that drives them down from the Arctic; the mysterious mass movements of their food, varying hare and lemming, which sometimes are here common and scarce there, and sometimes vice versa, would seem to have more to do with it. Now I could stand fifty below (the cold low here at the farm last winter, so Ike says) if I had to; but there is no argument at all with an empty belly. You pick up and go, and you go to sustenance. It is a curious physiological fact, by the way, the restlessness of hunger; of what use and significance is it to human beings? A latent character from hunting days, when the restlessness that today only exhausts the man on the dole, then served to whet his wits to razor edge and provide the emotional drive to march long distances, starving, to newer hunting grounds?

But the severity of the winter is evident in the roads. The mud season, as far as it concerns the last four miles of our backest stretch of back road, is far from over; and

when Ike brought us out last night in the old Buick, we were mired twice, and had to shovel and pry and plant stones and boards in the seemingly bottomless mud. Has it ever been observed exactly how long it takes a foot of frost to come out of the ground? Ike has told about digging through seven feet of frost below the roads when he worked on the village road crew. While the roads thus gather frost unto themselves, sheltered spots in the woods will remain absolutely frost-free through the coldest winters. I can find mud in my cedar swamp any day of the year. . . . The roads were given a real whack at Ike last night; so many of us came that he had to make two trips "downstreet" to bring us out.

Harold stood the journey well, at least does not appear any worse; but naturally he did not miss the opportunity to whine and groan and abuse Isabella in the most spiteful and vicious manner, with constant demands on her time and tongue-lashings in the guise of an invalid's complaints: affording final proof, and I needed none, of his egocentric nature. Isabella endured him like a saint. People are strange. The older I grow, the more I am puzzled by a humanity that once—God forgive me—was crystal-clear in my philosophy.

If anyone among us is happier at being in the country than I am, it is May. The country was made for children. Robins and bluebirds and owls were made for the delight of children. All the avifauna of the world was made for children. All the world was made for children. It's a pity we don't realize this and behave better, interlopers as we are in this theater of children. Is anything more pure, of the very essence, than the earnest joy in living of a child? Thoreau's man in earnest pales by comparison, fumbling, stumbling, confused, dispersed, stiffened in the joints by the adult-grown scales of shallow and distorted values—pales in comparison with a laughing child.

And then the children grow and change. Louise a few years ago was one with May. Now only the ghost of that recent child sometimes leaps out laughing from the corners of her eyes—but only for a breath. What has she become? A young woman of her generation, with just enough "Continental training" (while Charles' money held out) to be harmful. In my youth she would have been called a "flirt" by the Sunday-school, "fast" by the adults in mixed company, "a little slut" by the ladies in private. I mean that the society of my generation would have held her without respect. What does that imply? Only that the superficial perspective on our practical morals has changed; not necessarily the morals themselves. Quite likely Louise is as much a virgin as any comparable young maiden of my day. But in that time a girl fought like a tiger for the appearance of the most scrupulous integrity, while today the situation appears to be reversed, and any spinster seems to do her level best to act like an abandoned woman; while the realities of the matter, as I have suggested, doubtless remain constant in all time.

At any rate, young Hatch is not coming up until tomorrow or Saturday, and Louise caressed him at leave-taking in a way that would have made her grandmother, my sister Marion (and a whited sepulcher of the first water she was) hang herself and move to Tahiti.

And as for drink, Louise takes her liquor as a bat takes water, on the wing.

She is reduced now to amusing herself with Ireland and Steve Erling, Charles' old friend who came up with us.

There is something about that fellow Erling I have never liked. He makes me think of a puffin. There is nothing wrong with a puffin, but there is something wrong with a man who makes you think of a puffin. What are these snap reactions to certain characters which, unsoundly based though they may be, persist with us to the grave? Are we equipped with some apparatus akin to the sense organs on the aforementioned bat's wings

that warn him of approaching obstructions his eyes might miss, so that we naturally pull up short and shy away from personalities that might meet ill with our own? (But we don't always shy away from such; our best friends, who stand behind us for years, are sometimes found to be there only for the purpose of knifing us in the back.)

Ireland brought a ridiculous load of stuff with him. The ice-axe I found on the roof, and an ice-pick he said he found in the basement, and the shriek Bertha mounted by Harold when she tried to kill him—my hand trembles when I write her name, and the sun darkens at my window and I can no longer see the phoebe I have been watching about the piazza and the squeaking of that belated brown creeper out there at the maples (he should have gone on north by now—although I once observed a pair of breeders on this farm; the nest was above the pasture, in the only balsam in a stand of white pine) is stopped from my ears. . . .

To the blackest pit of hell with Bertha! I am at the farm; my conscience and my fears I flung behind me in the valleys! Ireland has even brought her letters, for study, as though I hadn't studied them enough; I would know Bertha's hand if she wrote in hieroglyphics. He insists on protecting May with as much vigilance as ever. I told him the farm was safe, and he asked me if Bertha had ever been here; but damn it, here her familiarity is useless! We are isolated; a stranger approaching us would be curiously watched if not questioned by every neighbor in the township before getting within a mile of the farm. But Ireland made the remark that it would have been better to have stayed in the city, where it is easier to see. So speak urban eyes.

I offered to pay him ten thousand dollars if he should, in these continuing investigations, locate Bertha. The man was impressed. . . . What price, Prometheus, the peace of thy liver?

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ERE on the farm, Ireland found, Dr. Pine's passion for simplicity had flamed undampened. While there had been nothing about his town house to set it apart from the town houses about it, his farm had gone to the opposite extreme from the country seats to which the wealthy commonly retired; there was not a formal garden or swimming-pool in evidence, nor a quarter-mile of private beach or a Colonial Union Station for the manor; Dr. Pine's farm on this muddy back road looked a great deal like any of the farmers' farms they had passed on their way up from the village—in fact, a little shaggier; it was almost down to the level of a vacationing professor's farm, or even an author's.

It was true that it differed from many of its neighbors in that the sills were sound, the chimneys pointed up, the place had a good tin roof, as well as a homemade terrace and a long porch, and the house was painted, and the connecting barn as well, both white. This, Ireland learned, because the barn was become a wing of the house, Dr. Pine having more need for guest-room than cow-ties.

But the yards were untended and overgrown, the old orchard was a chorus of grotesque and ancient trees, gnarled and contorted; and the fences, where they were not already flat, leaned feebly this way and that and tottered in the wind. The old stone fences had been long ago overgrown with brush; they afforded superb cover now, Dr. Pine said, and he used them as principal bases for his bird-feeding stations.

As for the house itself, it had begun, evidently a hundred years or so before, as a Cape Cod cottage of half a dozen rooms. In keeping with the practice of the coun-

try, woodshed, outbuildings and barn had been built out from the house in a connected string, thus putting everything under one roof for winter efficiency.

Since Dr. Pine's occupancy—he had been here forty years, Louise said—this series of buildings had been torn out inside and fitted with livable rooms, and to the original house another ell had been started in another direction, consisting of a new woodshed, toolshed and garage. The original house had suffered frequent violations to provide a library that extended, like an indoor silo, up a floor and a half to the roof-beams, with curving stairways and narrow galleries running around the towering walls of books; and to make way for electricity, running water, bathtubs and other luxuries.

In going from one room to another Ireland usually found two or three steps to go up or down, or a hall, or an angle of a hall. It was a maze, an amusement park concession put together by Dr. Pine for a laugh on the human race, inasmuch as only the old man and Ike Blue, the white-headed stoop-shouldered long-gallused caretaker, seemed able to find their way without trouble through any part of the place.

THERE WAS HERE, HOWEVER, a powerful spirit of peace, as though by some chance these things, the uncared-for grounds and crazily leaning fences and the monstrous house framed between the maples of the road and the sweep of the madow, and the birds, the unusual number of wild birds, were exactly the things that should be here together, not to make a pretty painted picture, but to breathe a feeling of serenity and harmony and rest, as though the whole thing had been arranged by a clever and thoughtful landscape architect. Perhaps it had.

Ireland came out on the porch in the late afternoon and Mrs. Bregan said, "Mr. Ireland," and smiled warmly at him. *Look out, Ireland thought, look out, sister; you'll crack your polish.* "Won't you sit down and talk to me?" Mrs. Bregan said. "Miami's bringing something to drink. I'm so stupidly lonesome. Charles pretends to like it up here, but I"—she shuddered and drew her tailored fur jacket close about her shoulders—"I have always found it unutterably deadly. Don't you?"

Ireland sat down. He said: "Well, I just got here." His eyes were quizzical. Something brewed here.

"I've been here several times, and I never could bear it. Even the sun here is so cold! It's so bright it hurts your eyes, but somehow it simply isn't alive—I suppose because it doesn't have anything alive to shine on. All this waste! I think there's nothing so beautiful as the sun on Fifth Avenue. Don't you? The straight striped shadows falling across the street, and the cabs and busses flashing, and all the color of the people and the shops, and all the movement, and everyone smiling, and the men walking along carrying their hats to get the sunlight on their heads. It is so beautiful, so vital! Don't you think? Will you have a cigarette?"

She handed him a pack from her jacket pocket, and her red-tipped fingers waited, somewhat greedily, for him to shake out a cigarette for her. She leaned back, smoking hungrily, and in the movement her wide fur sleeve caught on the splintered finish of an old oak table that stood by her chair.

She moaned, "The beastly thing," and disengaged her sleeve and examined it lovingly, petting it when she found it undamaged. She said: "Why does Hector have these frightful things? Why in the world does he keep this place as it is? It isn't fit for pigs. It's simply incredible. It's the worst sort of affectation, I think, for a man with all his money to live like this, and require others—he can't be entirely normal and do such things, do you think?" Her eyes were on Ireland, bright and hard and provoked, and she waited for his answer.

Never stir up a skunk unless you can kill it. Ireland said: "He's a character. It's his duty to be eccentric."

"But is *eccentric* just the word?" Mrs. Bregan purred, and an undercurrent of venom was definite now in her voice. "Really, I know this family quite well, Mr. Ireland, and I've thought often that there must be a strain of some—"

Miami came out on the porch bearing a tray of glasses half-filled with ice cubes, and a cocktail strainer. She put it down on the oak table.

Mrs. Bregan said with an outburst of graciousness, more human than Ireland had yet heard her: "Thank you, Miami. That was awfully sweet of you."

"Mmm," Miami said.

"But we don't need so many glasses. My goodness!"

"I didn't know," Miami said wearily. "They all come and go, come and go." She waddled back into the house.

"Where are the rest of them?" Ireland asked. "I didn't see anyone in the house."

"Oh, the baby's taking her nap, and Harold's taking his nap, and they both have their nurses with them; and Uncle Hector just got up from his nap, and he's out birding with Hebe, and Kistry too, I suppose; and the rest of them are climbing on the mountain, at least Steve and Louise, they're all out running about like children, now that they don't need to get permission any more from their detective!"

Ireland said, "Yes," and filled one of the glasses and handed it to her.

She said: "You've been working all day in your room, I believe I heard Miami say. I had no idea detectives were so industrious. I believe it's so stupid to go deeply into things, but after all, if it is one's profession. . . . Have you learned anything about Bertha that we did not know?"

"Afraid not," Ireland said. What the hell was she after?

"I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Ireland. I have something to say, and I have decided to please myself and say it. Listen closely. Don't miss it."

"Did you know her, Mrs. Bregan?"

"Only very slightly." She held out her glass and said with a certain shade of her old austerity: "Will you please? . . . Scarcely at all," she repeated. "Charles and I weren't married, you know, until after she was gone. When Charles got his money."

SHE SMILED AT HIM over the rim of her glass. Her eyelids were half closed.

Her eyes said: "Come, come don't you get it? You're a stupe, flatfoot. What good does it do me to talk?"

Her smile broke into a laugh, and she lowered her eyes. She tasted her drink. The edge of the glass was red from her lipstick.

She was a woman at a bridge-table now, too proud in the dignity of her silver hair and expensive furs to kick his foot under the table. Only stooping to the trifling amusement of counting her hand aloud with her eyes. And behind the amusement was beady intention, because she hated her opponent with all her heart, and she meant to win.

Ireland said: "All right. I'll buy it. What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Did I say something I shouldn't have?" She laughed again. Her cigarette trembled between her fingers. Her laugh was prolonged unnaturally. She bent her head, and with one pointed fingernail picked a fleck of tobacco from her lower lip.

"You spoke of Charles' money."

"Oh, yes, Charles' money." She laughed again. "Charles' money and Steve's business."

Ireland said: "What is Steve's business?"

"Money," Mrs. Bregan said with her arch look. "Money and business, business and money. Isn't it a bore? And poor Charles! Everybody picks on Charles. Poor, poor Charles!"

The whisky was getting to her. She said *poor Charles* and patently meant *damn Charles*.

"And poor dear Louise!" Mrs. Bregan said. Her voice grew introspective. "I'm really sorry that I was never able to reach Louise. She is a willful child—and that blind adolescent loyalty that she has never outgrown." Mrs. Bregan brightened and said humorously: "I'm so alone. Such a very old thing in my solitude. —Oh, Ike!" she called gayly. "How are you, Ike?"

Ike plodded around the house carrying a ladder and a hammer. "How do," he said.

"We went to the square dance one night last summer with Ike," Mrs. Bregan said. "We embarrassed him to death, because he was ashamed of us all in front of his friends. It is such fun, really. I almost wish I could go again." She hummed softly. "You must go some time while you're here, Mr. Ireland."

She went on humming, tapping her glass gently against the arm of her chair in a preoccupied way.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I saw Bertha, of course. Poor dazed, unhappy creature! Everyone sitting around her and watching her as if she—as if she were dying. She wouldn't talk to anyone but Steve. She said the family hated her. She said the most shocking things. And she'd have those terrible fits of grief about leaving little Kathie. . . . She talked, but her eyes didn't actually see you, you know. Like a—like some poor thin dog, asleep with its eyes open."

VOICES CAME TO THEM, and Dr. Pine and Hebe and Kistry appeared around the line of maples from the road.

"Oh, here they are!" Mrs. Bregan said. She raised an arm and waved.

George came in view a moment later, limping tediously, doing his best to keep up with the others.

"Poor, poor George!" Mrs. Bregan said. "Hello!" she called. "Hello, here we are!"

George looked up without answering, and stumped on by himself around the house toward the terrace.

Dr. Pine and Hebe and Kistry approached the porch, and Mrs. Bregan said: "Hello! Have you had a nice walk?"

Dr. Pine gave her an indignant look. Kistry went on into the house.

"Do sit down and have something!" Mrs. Bregan said. She picked up the cocktail shaker, somewhat unsteadily. "Hebe, dear, you look so cold!"

"I'm frozen," Hebe said. "I wore this because of the bushes. It's only a raincoat, and it's so cold and uncomfortable—mercy!" Ireland stood up, and Hebe sighed, "Thank you," and took his chair. "Goodness, Uncle Hector is an Indian. He's simply walked me to death."

"You must have a drink," Mrs. Bregan said effusively. She threw the melted ice out of one of the glasses. "It will do you good. It will warm you. But isn't that stupid—I'm afraid it's all gone! I suppose Miami couldn't find the big pitcher, to make enough. . . . Dear Uncle Hector! You must be exhausted! Won't you—"

"What the hell's got into you?" Dr. Pine barked. He shoved his wig forward, as if to shade his eyes the better to see her. "You sick?" He pulled up a rocking chair and sat on the edge of it, his jaw champing up and down. The last red edge of the sun dropped out of sight, and a chill and darkness fell on the air. "Kistry!" Dr. Pine bellowed. "Come on!"

"But surely, Hector," Mrs. Bregan said, "you're not going out again? My dear man, you'll kill yourself!"

Dr. Pine gave her an amazed look and got up and fumbled his way into the house. They heard him a minute later bawling again for Kistry.

"He's going back in the woods and hoot at the barred owl," Hebe said. "To see if it's still there, or where it is, or something of that sort. But gracious, I couldn't go another step."

"Not an owl!" Mrs. Bregan exclaimed delightedly, clapping her hands. "And would there be baby owls too? Oh, I want to go along!"

Hebe regarded her with wonder. "I suppose you can. Don't tell me, Laura, that you are beginning to feel for the beauties of nature, at this late date?"

"I have never been nice to Uncle Hector," Mrs. Bregan said. Her voice fell and was earnest and emotional. She found a paper of matches on the little table and lit another cigarette, without waiting for Ireland's attendance. "And I love owls," she said, busy with the cigarette, blowing smoke as she talked. She flashed a quick smile at Hebe and added, "—I think."

There was an expression of concern on Hebe's motherly face. Ireland watched her hesitate over exploring it further, and finally turn it aside. She said: "Speaking of Uncle Hector, I've had the nicest thought for his birthday Sunday—"

"But my dear, I sha'n't be here," Mrs. Bregan said, and jumped up as Dr. Pine and Kistry came back out of the house. "Uncle Hector, may I go along? Do you mind?"

"Eh? Go along? You?" He started away, grunting to himself. Kistry, at his side, carried a folding chair and a blanket and diverse other paraphernalia. After a dozen steps Dr. Pine swung around and yelled: "Well, come along, come along! What are you waiting for?"

"Laura!" Hebe said anxiously. "Laura, what do you mean?" Mrs. Bregan crushed out her cigarette on the bare wood of the table and started off the porch. She was wearing high heels, and her steps were uneven; she tripped and would have fallen if Ireland had not caught her. "Laura!" Hebe said, openly worried. "Laura, sit right down here. I want to talk to you."

"Don't be silly, dear," Mrs. Bregan said. "Hector is waiting. . . . Oh, it—it's Charles, isn't it?"

Ireland saw that Charles and Louise and Erling had come up from the road and stopped to talk to Dr. Pine. They left him and came on toward the house, Louise arm in arm with Stevie. Charles, in an old leather jacket, was whistling.

"At least take this coat," Hebe said. "Your jacket will be torn to ribbons. . . . Laura, what *do* you mean, you won't be here?" She took off her long raincoat and threw it over Mrs. Bregan's shoulders. Mrs. Bregan did not appear to be aware of it. Her eyes were on Charles, coming toward her through the dusk. Her face looked old. The rouge stood out on her skin.

Charles passed, whistling, without raising his head. Erling alone appeared to see her, and smiled and nodded: but his smile, for all its wealth of customary geniality, was perfunctory and impersonal.

"Louise!" Mrs. Bregan said.

Louise did not answer, and Ireland saw her eyes blazing with anger, her brown face a mask of bitterness. She went on into the house with her father and Erling.

"Laura," Hebe said in distress, "my dear, what is it?"

Mrs. Bregan shook her hand away and hurried across the overgrown yard to catch up with Dr. Pine. Her head was bent. The long raincoat flapped about her legs.

Hebe said: "What in the world has happened to her? Did she—did she say anything to you, Mr. Ireland?"

"I don't know," Ireland said.

CHAPTER TWELVE



NEVER knew Bertha," Isabella said. "That was seventeen years ago and I was in pigtails." She pouted. "How old do I look?"

"Old enough," Ireland said.

Isabella smiled, her red lips knowing and derisive. She swept the golden sheath of hair back from her face in a little sculptural female movement, modeled

for Ireland's attention. She was curled in a large chair near the fire. She wore a short-sleeved white dress, bordered in something like an Egyptian design, in a dark brilliant blue to match her eyes. The simplicity of the dress accentuated the slender grace of her body. A picture, a magazine cover, Ireland thought; the photographer had been sweating for an hour to get her just like this. Too beautiful to be true. Yes, indeed.

"Aunt Sibyl Bryndel took her to raise," Harold said from the couch.

THEY WERE in the living-room; Harold had decided he was strong enough to come downstairs—in this house, downstairs meant any place in the cottage wing—and he lay now on the sofa like a spindly white-faced Arab, a turban of bandage around his head, and a patchwork quilt drawn up to his chin.

"Bertha was some kind of distant relative, and Aunt Sibyl took her in as a companion for her daughter Rhoda. That is, Rhoda was May's grandmother."

Ireland said: "Was Bertha adopted?"

"Not by any means. The Bryndel line wants to keep its money. As a matter of fact, Aunt Sibyl treated Bertha like a dog. Everyone did, for that matter; I mean, everyone treated her like someone just a little more than a servant—that is, everyone except Rhoda and Uncle Hector. And later on Rhoda's daughter. Her name was Kathie. Aunt Sibyl died, and Rhoda died, and Uncle Hector was left the town house, and Bertha and Kathie stayed on there. Bertha took care of Kathie and helped Uncle Hector with his birdskins. She learned a lot about it, and did a lot of laboratory work for him, dissecting specimens and so on. In fact, when she went bugs, she thought she had turned into a bird. You know about that. In those days Uncle Hector had some crazy theory about the modification of the structure of birds, something like natural selection, I mean, only something entirely different, and it turned out all wrong."

"Who has handled the Bryndel estate?" Ireland asked. "Most of the time it seems to have been in the hands of minor children."

"Well, an estate of that size—quite an involved structure to it." Harold was overcome with diffidence, suddenly, at thus talking so freely, and swallowed and picked at his quilt.

Ireland said: "Well, who was Kathie's guardian? Bertha?"

Harold moved his head painfully.

"Oh, no—not legally, at least. In effect, she was her guardian, but only unofficially. Her legal guardian was Judge Krofft. You see, his office had managed the Bryndel estate—if you could put it that simply—for a long time. Then, about the time of the crash, something came up; Judge Krofft had been misusing books or falsifying reports or something; I don't know what it was, and anyway it was all settled quietly and the estate was put in somebody else's hands, and a new guardian was appointed for Kathie."

"Who was that?"

"Dr. Longnecker; he was an old friend of Uncle Hector's; he had a law office, among other things, and he's been Uncle Hector's legal adviser from time immemorial. He didn't work any harder at being Kathie's guardian than Judge Krofft had, but at least he was honest. He is May's guardian too. He was going to marry Aunt Marion, that's Charles' mother, years ago, but he didn't do it, and went to Mexico to study Aztec culture instead."

"That makes it perfectly clear," Isabella said, looking ironically at Ireland through lowered lashes. "This is the most complex family in existence. I've been in it for six years, and I'm not sure who's who yet."

"It's simple enough," Harold said. "Just remember my grandfather left his money to his favorite daughter, and his favorite daughter was Aunt Sibyl Bryndel, and

that's not my name. As far as who's who is concerned, that's all that counts."

"Darling," Isabella said, "did you make a joke? You're more than well."

"My head aches," Harold said.

"Shall I get another pill?"

Harold said sulkily: "No. Just let me alone and shut up about it."

His head was turned away from them, but Ireland had an idea Harold could read the smile of mock sympathy Isabella gave Ireland at his complaining voice. The honest grief and compassion—and love, Ireland reflected; no other word for it—that Isabella had shown the other day at Harold's bedside was gone. Harold was out of danger and so out of whatever secure place he had momentarily held in his wife's heart.

Ireland said: "About Bertha—"

The telephone rang in the corner of the room, and with a clatter Louise burst in upon them and raced to answer it.

"It's Hatch," she said. "I was just coming to call him." She picked up the phone and said happily: "Hello, Ugly!" She listened a moment and said in a changed voice: "Who is this? . . . Oh. Oh. Just a minute." She put the phone down. "It's for Isabella," she said. "Darn that Hatch!" She clattered out again. She was, Ireland saw, wearing wooden shoes.

At the telephone Isabella said: "Hello . . . Oh, no—but you shouldn't."

Harold's head turned restlessly from side to side. Ireland got up and stood by the fire, and he could see Harold's eyes listening, sullen and tormented.

Isabella, at the telephone, laughed—a laugh that was a rich manifestation of herself. Faintly they could hear the scratching sound of a man's voice on the wire.

Isabella said: "Well, it *was* sweet of you. It *was*. No. No—'frad not. . . . I know. . . . Oh, you *did*? I don't believe it."

Harold threw back the quilt. He hooked a narrow hand on the back of the couch and pulled himself up, so he could watch Isabella at the phone.

"I will, oh, indeed. And you too. . . . All right—if you want to. . . . mmm, swell. . . . all right, don't forget. . . . by." She hung up.

Harold said: "Who was that?"

"Only Kip. Oh, you're sitting up? Why, Mamma's big boy!"

"What did he want?"

"Just business. You'll get dizzy. Sure you're warm enough?"

"What about business?"

ISABELLA, SITTING ON THE ARM of his couch, smiled artlessly with her tongue in her cheek and said warningly, "Harold—"

"What about it?"

"It happens to be my business."

"Yes, and you make the most of it, don't you?"

"Darling," Isabella said evenly, "don't try to be nasty to me any more. You're not quite sick enough now to keep it up, are you?"

His feverish eyes wavered and fell before hers. "I'm just getting tired of—let it go—I couldn't say anything to you that—just leave me alone. Don't talk to me."

There was a brush of pink on her cheekbones. She rose from the couch in one swift movement, the blue edge of her skirt swinging, and said pleasantly to Ireland: "Oh, look, you can see the Northern Lights." She walked to the window and stood by it looking out into the darkness. Harold's head sank on his chest, and he lowered himself again to the couch and pulled up the quilt. Ireland turned away from the look in his eyes.

"They are bright," Isabella said. "But there isn't much color. Oh—there's someone coming over the hill—or going over the hill, or something."

Ireland joined her at the window and looked out. The aurora, a great glow on the horizon, silhouetted the breast of the hill behind the house.

"It's gone now," Isabella said, "whoever it was. Or whatever it was."

The telephone rang again, and they heard the distant clatter of Louise coming to answer it.

Ireland left the living-room and found his way out of the house. He passed the white kitchen where Miami attended to her steaming kettles, and went out the back door and crossed the flagstone terrace to the foot of the knoll behind the house.

The early night was cool and still. The Northern Lights flicked and flared, rose and fell.

Ireland walked to the top of the hill. He enjoyed the feel of the grass under his feet. He stood on the summit of the hill and looked from the lights in the north to the bright red star Antares, low on the southern horizon. It was good up here, very good to be here.

He saw no one.

He sat down, watching the lights. Pale white rays were going up now, Naval searchlights from the upper air. Then the lights spread into a fan, and across the fan delicate red and green color shuttered back and forth. Ireland locked his hands behind his head and lay on his back, watching. He could hear no sounds from the house, and that too was good.

Here he could think: reflect on what had been clear and was now confused: what had been fact and was now doubt.

In the distance, a fox barked. . . . If it was fall now, he would get his rifle, if he had a rifle up here, and get his dog, if he had a dog here, and go out and get himself a coon.

Might have been a coon annoying that fox. Foxes will back down from coons. Well, a coon is a tough boy for his weight. The little brother of the bear—the little ring-tailed brother of the bear.

SOMETHING SQUALLED deep in the woods, and Ireland sat up, listening. Not an owl, not a cat. It shrieked again, an eerie long-drawn sound. What the devil was it? A third time, a high-pitched, wild-voiced cry, almost like a woman screaming. . . . Hell, it was a woman—couldn't be anything else. . . . Now it was going on and on, in an endless panic, or horror, or alarm.

Ireland plunged down the hill, running. He reached the edge of the woods, tripped on a rock and stumbled for half a dozen paces before he regained his balance. He trotted along the wall of trees, looking for an entering tote-road, cowpath, some opening. He came to a break and jogged into it.

The scream died in a sound like a sob, and there was silence. Ireland kept on, slowed by the darkness of the woods, and presently heard the woman again, crying now, hysterically, uncontrollably.

Seconds later he saw the glint of a light. He worked his way off the road, thrusting aside low-hanging branches, and called out to the light.

Dr. Pine's voice shouted: "Over here! Who are you?"

Ireland broke out of the brush into the full glare of the old man's flashlight; and Dr. Pine said, "Oh, you, boy," in a queer dispirited tone.

Ireland said, "What is it?"

Dr. Pine swept around his light. It fell on Kistry. She was on her knees, her hands over her face, her bent back heaving with her sobs, shuddering with the convulsions of her sobs.

The light gleamed on Hebe's raincoat, rolled in a shapeless bundle on the ground. A silk-stockinged leg, a high-heeled slipper, was half visible. Ireland walked closer and saw that Mrs. Bregan had fallen like a dropped deer, her arms and legs doubled. Her skull had been shattered.

Dr. Pine said: "Here's the bird." With his toe he kicked a mounted shrike into the pool of light.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



AY followed Ireland, tugging at his trouser leg, and said: "What are you going to do?"

"Call up on the telephone," Ireland said.

"Why?"

"Because it's lunch-time."

He sat down at the telephone in the living-room and asked for Long Distance and gave the number of Yudy's Bar and Grill in New York. May watched him solemnly. She squinted her eyes against the sun sparkling on the window and turned her head on one side to look up at him.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'll live," Ireland said. The operator told him she would ring him, and Ireland replaced the receiver and waited.

"I've had lunch," May said. "I had mashed potatoes and chicken and dessert. Are you hungry? Are you hungry, Sam? Huh?"

Ireland said: "Huh?"

May laughed and grabbed his leg and rolled her head on his knee, laughing. She cried repeatedly: "Huh? Huh? Huh?"

Outside, the Sheriff's muddy car stood in the yard, and beside it the equally muddy pick-up truck belonging to one of the deputies. The Sheriff was officed in the library, still taking statements from members of the household; and Mrs. Bregan was by now on a table in the village mortuary; and the undertaker, if a conscientious man, was no doubt wishing for a photograph to work from, but prevented by nicety of feeling from requesting one from the family. Would Mrs. Bregan's patrician soul cringe from his bucolic hands? A uniformed officer from the village police force was stationed down the road to turn away the curious, as the saying has it. Reporters had arrived from as far away as Rutland, to snap distance shots of Mrs. Bregan's sheeted body going into the ambulance, while Dr. Pine looked angrily on, his wig over one ear. Murder had come to the house, and the birds had shied away from the activity and the roar of motors grinding up and down the road and in the yard. The birds had withdrawn to watch from the fence-rows. Only the phoebe remained, in its nest under the eaves on the porch. But it was not a shrike; no, certainly not a shrike.

May said: "Talk to May! Everybody's crying. What do they cry for?"

"I wish I knew," Ireland said. He picked May up and put her on his knee, and she yelled and struggled to get down. He put her down.

"Where's Helen?" she demanded.

"Talking to the Sheriff."

The telephone rang, and Ireland said: "Hello. . . . All right. . . . Hello, Yudy? Sam Ireland. Joe Schultz there? That's right. Okay."

"Let May talk," May said, reaching.

"Hush," Ireland said, "or I'll knock your block off."

May giggled. "Knock May's block off!"

"Joe," Ireland said. "I—yeah. All right, shoot."

May raised her eyebrows questioningly and shaking her head back and forth, said: "You going to knock May's block off?"

"Did you get a description? I see. . . . No, to hell with the birds; that's what I wanted. What about the other thing? And what have you got on Erling?"

"Are you going to knock May's block off?" May asked. She pulled at his arm and struggled to reach the telephone, enjoying herself very much.

Miss Peabody came into the room and saw May and said, "Oh, you monkey! Is that any way to act?" and ran

to her and dragged her out of reach of the telephone, which Ireland had been holding above his head. "Thanks for looking after her, Irish," Helen said. "She's getting to be a saucy little baggage, and I thought you might have taken the chance to paddle her."

"That's all right," Ireland said. "Any time you say. . . . No, go ahead, Joe."

Helen said: "We'll go away now and not disturb Sam any more. He's talking on the telephone, and he doesn't want to be bothered."

"He wants to knock my block off," May said.

"Mmm, I imagine you deserve it. . . . Oh, Irish, the Sheriff told me to ask you to come in again when you can."

"Okay," Ireland said.

"Say good-by," Helen said.

"Good-by," May yelled.

Sam nodded. "Good-by." He said into the telephone; "Not you, Joe. . . . Yes. Well, it's progress. Look, Joe, you understand about the lettuce on the line, so try and—"

"Oh, and I almost forgot," Helen said. "You did come and take back that little gun of yours, didn't you?"

" . . . so spread some dough around and see what gives. What you've got is a help, but we can't spare the time. All hell's cut loose, and this has got to be cracked. Get Armistead back from Tennessee. . . . You have? That's all right. Give him twenty-four hours to check everything in town; banks, insurance, hotels, license and permit bureaus, water, gas and electric offices, tax bureaus, election-board records, laundries, loan companies, welfare agencies—" He turned from the phone with a black-browed look at Helen that was comical in its intensity. He said: "What did you say?"

She said: "But I thought—I—" Her face went white. She said: "Oh, Irish."

Ireland said swiftly into the telephone, "Listen, Joe. Yes, Joe, call me back when you get the word on Erling. Okay. Right. Later."

HE SLAMMED DOWN the receiver and got up. Helen was frightened. May held to her hand and was frightened also, without knowing why.

Ireland said: "We'll go up and look around."

She protested: "But it couldn't have been stolen! I—I only put it down for a minute—it was there on the table when you looked in yesterday afternoon, and the next time I looked, and it *couldn't* have been any time at all—five minutes—it was gone, and I supposed you—" She led the way out of the cottage wing and through the crazy-quilt of rooms and passages into the barn. "Oh, golly, Sam, if it's so, I—"

"All right," Ireland said. "Don't worry about it."

But there was guilt on her conscience, and it would not be withheld. "I've got to tell you—I did try to keep the gun on me every minute, but it fell into the bathtub when I was giving May her bath, and it got all soaked and soapy—and so I had it on the table drying off. So it didn't have any cartridges in it, anyway."

Ireland breathed deeply and said, "Well, Lord!"

"But I didn't know if it would shoot or not, after it had been wet. . . . The cartridges are still up on top of the medicine closet, drying out. I thought I'd ask you for some new ones."

"Why in the hell didn't you tell me about it when it happened? I gave you that gun for protection. It's no damned good lying around empty."

"You don't talk like that," May said.

"I apologize."

"You don't have to," Helen said in a muffled voice. "If anything—anything happens to May now—"

"Nothing's going to happen to May," Ireland said.

They reached the nursery, and Ireland shook the place down thoroughly.

"It just isn't here any place," Helen said hopelessly. "I know I left it on that table, and I didn't see it again. It's

simply—it—it must have been stolen; that's all that could have happened."

Ireland stood in the center of the room, in Helen's bedroom, plucking his lip, his eyes traveling over the room another time, looking for something he might have missed, his thoughts irritably spinning the kaleidoscope in his mind. . . . It was no good to think hurry, hurry and race like a squirrel in a cage; the faster the kaleidoscope whirled to his urgency, the less clear it became.

He lifted his head and said: "There's someone talking. Where does that come from?"

Helen said, "Oh," and a subtle light crossed her face, something like a quick mischievous smile that started up in her eyes and was suppressed. "It's in the next room."

Ireland crossed to the door and opened it upon a bathroom.

"Beyond the bathroom," Helen said in a low voice. "See, there's a connecting door. The room is vacant."

"Vacant? Then who's in there?"

"You listen," she whispered. "It's time for May's nap."

Ireland moved through the bathroom to the opposite door and, frowning, opened the transom quietly and listened.

He heard Isabella's voice:

"But I can't help it. Who wouldn't be afraid, after what happened to Laura, and not knowing—"

"Don't talk like that," George's voice said huskily. "Don't talk as if anything could happen to you."

"But why? We don't know—and there's nothing we can do—I'm scared; I really am scared."

"You're much too lovely. Nothing could hurt you."

"Oh, you goof! I'm not just—I really am terrified. I want Harold to leave, but he won't."

"Go away? Good God, I couldn't live without you, you know that! You—"

"You don't have to stay here, either."

"You forget that I haven't the money you've got. I'm not entirely as free."

"Yes," Isabella said lazily, "that's just the way Harold talks. What good is my money? You're just like Harold; you're—" There was a silence and the sound of a kiss. "You are a funny little gnome. Or troll. Or—"

"I don't know why I deserve you," George said, and his voice was uneven with deep feeling. "You know it's the only—the only good thing that's ever come to me."

"Just because you're good yourself, George. You're nice."

"I'm a crippled old man."

"Hush."

ANOTHER SILENCE and Ireland was about to turn away. George's voice said, "I love you," and it sounded as though he was about to cry. Ireland could not picture George crying.

He went back to May's room. The little girl was in bed, and Helen was clamping the covers at the sides of her crib.

"Good night," May said.

"Good night," Ireland said. Then to Helen: "You've heard them in there before."

"I tried not to listen, but I couldn't help overhearing, as the saying goes," Helen said. "I think she—I mean, I think she is really in love with him. He's such a wistful little man. He's even more wistful than Harold; so—if that's the way it is."

"Why that particular room?"

"Well, Isabella and Harold are in the next rooms just beyond, and George and Hebe are across the hall, if you can call it a hall. I mean, just around that jog and down the steps."

"Sweet dreams," May said.

"Sweet dreams," Ireland said abstractedly.

"Well," Helen said, and her teeth were white in a flash of her raffish smile, "you be careful."

"Sleep tight," May said.

"I'll do my best," Ireland said. As an afterthought he lifted his Super .38 automatic out of its spring holster and handed it to Helen and went downstairs to the library.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE Sheriff was a long, loose-jointed man who looked like Uncle Sam without whiskers. He chewed tobacco and suffered discomfort thereby in Dr. Pine's library, where there were no spittoons. He sat at Dr. Pine's desk patiently listening, as he had sat throughout the day, and a pile of handwritten papers rose steadily at his elbow.

Charles faced him across the desk. His sleek gray head was erect, his suave face stiff and emotionless.

The Sheriff raised his eyes to Ireland and said, "Oh, hello," and Charles turned his head, but his black eyes, dead holes in his skin, saw nothing.

The Sheriff said, "Sit down some place, Mr. Ireland. I'll be with you right off. . . . Now, Mr. Bregan, about your wife's state of mind yesterday just before she started off with Dr. Pine and Miss Kistiry Johnson. She was stirred up. She talked to several people, and they all say she acted unnatural. Ayah. She was worked up to quite a degree."

"We had had an argument. We quarreled, and said some things we both would have regretted if—"

His voice trailed away.

He sat erect and immobile, his clipped mustache scarcely discernible against the gray color of his face. His eyes blinked steadily.

"Ayah," the Sheriff said. The cud stirred in his long cheek. "You wa'n't speaking to each other?"

Charles answered after a wait: "No. We had both lost our tempers, and—"

"What was your quarrel about?"

"Well, I've told you. She was worried about my drinking too much."

"Ayah. You do drink some, Mr. Bregan?"

"That doesn't have any more to do with this than—"

"Well, I do some myself. Nothing wrong about sociability. But now there was one time I was worrying about my married daughter. They wa'n't getting along at all right, and had to be something done about it, and I didn't know what. I took to tipling more'n I should. Have to take care when you're an elected official, you know. Same as a schoolteacher. Man can't call his life his own. Ayah. Well, straightened itself out one day. They had a young-un, and seemed 's though that turned the trick. Well sir, wa'n't worrying any more, didn't have need of a bottle any more. Ayah. . . . Now, Mr. Bregan, what was worrying you?"

"Nothing at all that bears on what has happenēd."

The Sheriff sighed lengthily. "Ayah," he said at last.

"Business," Charles said.

"And you said your business—"

"Investments."

"Like stocks and bonds and the like of that?"

"Well, yes."

Ireland, in a low chair by the window, found his eyes running over the books in the nearby shelves. "Birds of New England," "Birds of South America," "Birds of Western Pennsylvania," "Economic Relations of Indiana Birds," "Notes on the Nature of the Food of the Birds of Massachusetts," "The Structure of Birds," "Anatomy of Birds and Notes of Vertebrate Dissection." Ireland drew out the largest book among the pamphlets and volumes, and looked in the index for *Shrike*.

The Sheriff said: "Well, sir, I guess that's about all. Seem's though. I thank you." He rustled the papers on the desk, writing.

"Quite all right," Charles said. He got up.

"Oh—one more thing," Sheriff Burr drawled. "This crazy woman,"—he sought through his papers until he found her name—"Bertha Arriven. You were starting to tell me what it was she had against your family, and you never got around to it. I have here—" He read: "*She had delusions of persecution.*"

"That's right," Charles said. And after a moment, with a break of exasperation in his voice: "Don't you understand what that means?"

"Well, guess I might. But what was she being persecuted about?"

"Nothing. I told you she thought a lot of the little girl she was taking care of. She had been like a—like a sister to the little girl's mother. She got the fixation, among other things, that we were trying to take the little girl away from her. After there was discussion of placing Bertha in an institution, that is. But in her rational intervals she realized, of course, that she was not well and that we were only doing our best for her. But these things now are—not rational, that's obvious."

"Mmm. And that little girl was which one? I can't keep them straight."

"She grew up to be the mother of the little girl here in the house now. Her name was Kathie. She was lost at sea, with her husband, two years ago."

"Mmm." The Sheriff had put a pair of glasses on his nose, and he looked over the top of them now at the papers in his hand. "Ayah. All right, sir. Thank you."

"Is that all you want?"

"Believe so. . . . Oh, no, no it aint, not altogether, I guess. Here's another thing: What your wife said last night about going away, just before she went out walking. What did she mean by that?"

"About—going away?"

"Ayah. Yes sir. Said she wouldn't be here Sunday for Dr. Pine's birthday party. Know what she meant?"

CHARLES SAID: "Is this some clever idea of yours for questioning me?"

"Well, I aint making it up, if that's what you mean. No. Just forgot to mention it, that's all. Sit down again, if you want to. You don't know what she meant?"

Charles thought it over before answering. "No. This is the first I've heard about it."

"Hmph! Shouldn't think she could have had some warning of what was going to happen to her? Like a spirit warning?"

Charles said sharply: "That's the most asinine thing you've said yet."

"Anh? Well, maybe 'tis, maybe 'tis. . . . You might be right. . . . Couldn't be, now—you and your wife been having any trouble over Mrs. Jeans?"

"Over Mrs.—Isabella? What the devil do you mean?"

The Sheriff got up and walked across the room and opened a window and spat. He went back to the desk but didn't sit down. He stood leaning forward with his hands resting on the desk-top, and waited.

Charles said: "I don't understand what the hell you're beating around the bush about. If you mean—" His voice cracked again, and there was a long pause.

"It's ridiculous to make a point of it," Charles said at last.

"There hasn't been anything between Isabella and me for months. It's been over and done with and forgotten. It had nothing whatever to do with anything my wife may have said or thought or done."

"Then that wasn't why your wife was leaving you?"

"I didn't say she was leaving me!"

"Well, that's what Mr. Ireland thinks, and he was the one talking to her."

"I don't give a damn what Mr. Ireland thinks."

Ireland looked up from his book, and Charles' face was scarlet, his even teeth bared below his mustache, his hands knotted and shaking with anger.

"My wife's death had nothing to do with anyone except a lunatic who has sworn to wipe out this entire family, and who—if you—while the police spend their time on idiotic—instead of looking for her, getting out and finding her—

"You question me as if I'm suspect in this—this thing that's happened to me! I've told you, and my daughter's told you, and Erling's told you, that I was in my room changing for dinner when it happened—you can't implicate me in something that happened when I was—"

"All right, Mr. Bregan," the Sheriff said. "That's all, sir, and thank you for your time."

"You speak of Isabella," Charles went on, past control of his words, "and I will tell you that if anyone in this house did have anything to do with that tragedy, it was Isabella. She's a devil from hell; whatever she can't own, she hates; if anyone in this house is in league with Bertha, it is she, for the simple reason that it would be her nature. She's inhuman—she's a witch—and she hates everything real in the world because she can't be real herself—everything that doesn't cling to her—"

Charles broke off, and strode out of the room and slammed the door with violence, and the fury and malevolence of his words hung in the room like brimstone.

HIS RAGE, IRELAND suspected, was heightened by anger at himself for letting himself get out of hand to begin with. This had been the sharpest goad. Charles valued his self-control, his polish, his manner of a gentleman above all things. It was the symbol of himself. When Charles came to look at death, he would not think of facing it like a man, but like a gentleman.

And so he was gone now for a drink. An ounce or two of alcohol can work wonders with a man's rusting armor. The years slide back, and the armor takes on a marvelous shine, as good as new, while the strangling nerves forget.

The Sheriff worked on his papers, and Ireland returned to his book. He looked at the page without reading the words. His thoughts were now mice in a bale of cotton, worrying the amorphous half-truths of half-revealed people, thrusting this way and that; everywhere was inviting softness; nowhere was light; and progress was suffocated by events that had no meaning. Haste was imperative, but there was no tunnel begun that did not collapse about his ears. The pictures in the kaleidoscope ran together to make nonsense.

"Well, sir," the Sheriff said, and pushed his work from him and turned to Ireland.

Ireland said: "I've been talking to my office in New York. My investigator has traced her out of the hospital she was in eight years ago, to a rooming-house. She stayed there a year. So far, he can't pick up anything after that. But he found out that for as long as she was there, she was in a wheel-chair—an invalid, crippled from a pelvic fracture."

The Sheriff said, "Hanh," and scanned his papers, peering owlishly over his glasses. "Ayah, I've got that. She was in a traffic accident."

"She was hit by a cab," Ireland said. "I had understood that she had been in the cab when it smashed up. But it now appears she was struck while walking across a street. My investigator got a record of the accident. He can't locate the driver of the cab."

"There's another thing. A week or so ago someone left a dead shrike at Dr. Pine's door, in New York. Dead shrikes aren't easy to come by. This wasn't a mounted bird. Freshly killed."

"I sent this guy out to buy a dead shrike for himself—the best way I knew of getting a line on the way that bird was procured."

"Joe has found the place that bird came from. A pet shop. The owner said he might be able to get him a shrike, if he wanted it bad enough, and he told Joe he had got one for someone else awhile back."

"He wondered what the hell people were wanting with dead shrikes."

"Well," the Sheriff said with interest, sitting forward on his chair. "He able to identify the person he got it for?"

"A boy," Ireland said. "Nine or ten years old. A colored boy. Probably a shoeshine kid. The boy offered twenty bucks for a dead shrike—and paid it."

"Well, someone sent him there, I should say. What about locating the boy?"

"Not much chance. Joe's taking a crack at it now, but a kid like that—someone probably gave him five bucks or so for the errand; the kid knows there's something screwy about it. Even if Joe should find the right boy, I doubt if the kid would admit it."

"Well, sir," the Sheriff said, "I don't know."

His fingers drummed on the desk. The lump of tobacco moved restlessly in his jaw, and he went to the window and got rid of it.

"Most everyone I've talked to in this house swears that crazy woman did this killing; and what's more, they seem to believe it when they say it. They haven't seen her for seven-eight years—why, they can't even be sure she's still alive, but they're all as sure as shooting anyhow, and they're all scared stiff. Ayah. Well, now, I'd be scared too if a lunatic was hiding around to bash in my head, but dammit—" he lifted his hand and brought it down with a thud on the desk—"it just can't be! To say that crazy woman came clear up here from New York, came out here from the village—without a soul seeing her—stole a pick out of Ike's toolshed, and— It's impossible! But they're all intelligent people. Smarter'n I am—maybe. Think they are, anyway. And shouldn't wonder but they're right. . . . But a baby could see—"

Ireland said: "If you're afraid enough, you don't see."

"Yes sir, that's right. But—well, I don't think so. D'you?"

Ireland said: "I don't know."

He got up and put away his book and looked out of the window. A hawk was sailing over the hill in lazy circles. Now if Dr. Pine could talk to the birds, and enlist that hawk with his telescope eyes, and an owl or two, and a woodpecker's ears—

"There was a gun stolen out of the nursery yesterday afternoon," Ireland said.

"Ah? Anh? A gun? Yesterday afternoon? Before Mrs. Bregan was killed? What the deuce would—that the deuce does that mean?"

IRELAND DIDN'T ANSWER, and the Sheriff got out his plug and bit off another chew. While his teeth worked at crushing the tobacco, he shook his head slowly from side to side.

He said in a voice thick with juice: "Let's just sight up this tree again, Mister, and see if maybe it aint as limby as it looks."

"Now—"

He shuffled through his papers: "Dr. Pine and Miss Kistry Johnson, colored. They are in the woods with Mrs. Bregan at dark. They hear something like a bird calling, but Dr. Pine said it wa'n't. Said he didn't know what 'twas. Sounded like a squeak or a whistle. Might have been one tree rubbing against another."

"Mrs. Bregan went off by herself to see if 'twas a bird. After a bit Dr. Pine heard Miss Johnson screaming. She had found Mrs. Bregan. Mrs. Bregan was dead. Her skull had been whacked open with a pick. At the coronal suture, Doc Barnstable says."

"We know 'twas a pick, because Ike missed the pick from his toolshed. But we couldn't find it in the woods—or we haven't been able to find it anywhere else."

"There was a stuffed butcher-bird—shrike—on the ground by Mrs. Bregan's body. It had been stolen from Dr. Pine's house last Monday, in New York."

"This is the second time the bird-woman, they say, has attacked a member of this family, in the same way. T'other time was Mr. Jeans, but she didn't kill him.

"Around about the time of the murder, few minutes before or few minutes after, Mrs. Jeans saw an unidentified person on the hill behind the house, either coming to the house or leaving it, she couldn't tell.

"At about the time of the murder, Mr. and Mrs. Jeans were in the house in the living-room. The cook, Mrs. Miami Ointreau, colored, was in the kitchen. These testified by Mr. Ireland. Ike Blue was in the garage, gone to sleep. Mrs. Morey was in the library writing. Mr. Morey was taking a bath and shaving. Miss Helen Peabody, nursemaid, was putting the child in her care, May Bryndel Descartes, to bed. These are uncorroborated statements.

"Mr. Bregan was in his room changing his clothes. He talked back and forth through the door to his daughter in the next room. He said something once to Mr. Erling when Mr. Erling came in the room where his daughter was.

"There had been some trouble between Mrs. Bregan and her husband and her stepdaughter. Mr. Bregan said they had been arguing about his drinking. Miss Louise Bregan made the free statement that she didn't care what had happened to her stepmother. She said she didn't like Mrs. Bregan, and never had, and wouldn't deny it."

Ireland remembered Louise giving her statement to the Sheriff a few hours before, dry-eyed and even haughty, and he remembered hearing her weeping, during the night, after Mrs. Bregan's body had been brought to the house. He remembered stopping by her door to listen to her grief. You cannot make amends to the dead, and that is the sorrow of the living.

THE SHERIFF'S VOICE droned on, reading, and at last he stopped. He took off his glasses and folded them and put them away and squinted and blinked his eyes and looked up at the high ceiling.

"I feel like a frog in the bottom of a well, in this room," he said. "Heard about this house, quite often. Never saw it before. Be dogged if I was ever in anything like it before, either. . . . Well, sir, that's it—except for the fact that everyone in this house seems to be dead sure it's going to happen again. Seem's though that's our first row to hoe. If 'twa'n't—" He went to the window to spit.

He came back to the desk and said: "Well, sir, I'll tell you, I'm going to be frank about it: if Mr. Bregan didn't have an alibi, I think I should take him into custody. I think that's the best way to guard this house against murder happening here again—because I am more than a particle convinced in my mind that he did it." He looked closely at Ireland. "But I admit I don't know how."

Ireland said: "Did he try to kill Mr. Jeans?"

The Sheriff thought it over and said finally: "Well, that's like a friend of mine had a cow for sale and she was a three-titter, and he claimed it made her a better cow because she didn't have so much to think about. Well, sir, I don't know about Mr. Jeans. Maybe the crazy woman did that herself. That was down in New York, where she is, presumably.

"I can think better if I think about this one thing here. And the first thing I think I'm convinced of is that one of the people in this house murdered Mrs. Bregan, for the simple reason that a stranger couldn't get out to this back farm without someone seeing her—or him, or whoever 'twould be.

"But if someone in the house did it, there's only one of 'em, from what I've got in these statements to go on, that had any reason to do it, and that was Mr. Bregan.

"Now look here: Strikes you peculiar, doesn't it, that Mr. Bregan should be the only one here with a fully corroborated alibi? You saw Mr. and Mrs. Jeans here in

the house—was talking to them; but as I understand it, you went out, and Mrs. Jeans says she went upstairs then to her room—and in the time between then and when that what's-er-name found Mrs. Bregan's body and started yelling, either Mr. or Mrs. Jeans could have run down to the woods and done that killing and run back—I mean to say it would have been possible, far as time went by itself. Of course, neither one of 'em could have done it; in the first place, Mr. Jeans couldn't run any place, being laid up more or less in bed; and in the second place, they couldn't have run down to the woods in the dark and been sure of finding Mrs. Bregan right away, or at all, down there at night; and in the third place, they couldn't have been down there making that bird-call or whatever it was that Mrs. Bregan went looking for. But I'm only pointing out that their alibi does not include what was probably the actual time of the murder.

"Neither does Dr. Pine's, or that Kistry with him. They were separated down there in the woods, because Kistry was by herself when she found Mrs. Bregan's body. Neither does Mr. Erling's, or Mr. and Mrs. Morey's, or anybody's except Mr. Bregan's and his daughter's—and their stories only support each other.

"Now," the Sheriff said, "I ask you."

He smote the desk in thought.

"Thing is, what can I do? I can assign a deputy here. That's all." He said in sudden disgust: "The county attorney'll laugh me out of countenance when I talk about Mr. Bregan. Where'd Mr. Bregan get that stuffed bird, he'll say. Dr. Pine identifies it as one of two stolen from him. Why'd he fool and fuss with the butcher-bird at all? If he stole a gun yesterday afternoon from the nursery, why didn't he use that, instead of troubling himself with a pick? Did Mr. Bregan write those letters from the bird-woman?"

Ireland said: "I can settle that point for you, Sheriff. Bertha Arriven wrote the letters herself."

"How d'you know that?"

"They show her handwriting characteristics. There are a hundred similarities, between the printing in the threatening letters and her script—and a sample of her old printing I've got, for that matter. A forger could imitate her script, but he couldn't copy those similarities into printing."

"Ayah," the Sheriff sighed. "Ayah—ayah. Well, I presume you're right. Remains to be proved. Something the experts could argue over all week. —Yes! Come in!"

The deputy, a scrawny man with a little grinning face behind an enormous bony nose, opened the door and said: "Dr. Pine wants to talk to you."

"All right," Sheriff Burr said. "Certainly." He rubbed his hand over his scalp in a curious gesture, pulling his hair upright, and pushed back his chair and stood up. He said to Ireland on a long breath, "Well, sir—" and Dr. Pine came in on Kistry's arm.

The old man looked feeble. His bandy legs were not steady. His face was parchment, and his aged eyes flashed in anger at his own weakness and everything in general. One earpiece of his spectacles was dangling, and as they came in, Kistry rehooked it for him and straightened his wig. The old man made his way, leaning heavily on her, to a chair and sat down, and Kistry stood by.

SHERIFF BURR, STILL standing, said: "Well, sir, I've been making arrangements with Mr. Ireland about—"

"For God's sake, sit down and shut up," the old man said breathily. "You chatter like a chipmunk. I don't want to hear about your arrangements. I came in here to talk to Ireland." His jaw worked for a moment, and he had a momentary difficulty in speaking. "Ireland, there's an empty room next to May's nursery. I want you to sleep in there of nights, I want you right there, right there by her. You and Helen—I'm trusting you two to watch out for her." He crouched in his chair and shot

out his jaw and said: "You do that, young man. Just look out for her."

"I will," Ireland said. "Don't worry about her."

The old man flipped his hand impatiently. The skin hung flabbily on the big bones of his fingers.

He said: "Another thing. Go upstairs presently and talk to Louise. Poor kid's in a hell of a state. She'll listen to you. Calm her down. Thank God, Hatch is on his way up."

The Sheriff said: "Hatch?"

"Her sailor," Ireland said.

"The officer on sick leave, ayah. I remember."

"As long as you're here, Dr. Pine," Ireland said, "the Sheriff and I would like to get some additional information." The Sheriff looked surprised. "On the financial angle," Ireland said.

Dr. Pine grunted. "What do you mean by that?"

"First, has Charles got any money?"

The old man barked a laugh. "He wouldn't be putting up with me if he did have."

"His wife?"

"Where would she get it? She was a third-rate actress when Charles married her. Her people had nothing. . . . Now, hold on. I believe she owned a little property; Charles gave it to her years ago when he could afford it—some frontage on the Sound in Connecticut, undeveloped but rather valuable. I have an idea Charles would have liked to cash it in, but she wouldn't do it. She wanted to build on it sometime and live there, if they ever got the money to do it."

"What about the rest of the family?"

"Hebe and George are penniless," the old man said with indifference. "Bad investments, foolishness; Hebe never had a brain in her head. Harold—the same. What little he had is in Continental banks, and it's frozen there. Isabella is well to do, however, in her own right. Her people had means. As for myself, I can live. It is your wants that make you poor. Mine are simple. I have been thrifty with my inheritance. I'll be able to feed myself all my days."

Ireland said: "If Isabella didn't marry Harold for money—"

Dr. Pine cackled and said: "Why did she? Don't ask me, boy. I took occasion to ask her once myself. She said Harold was the nicest man she'd met, that's all." The old man hooted and slapped his knee.

"WHAT IT AMOUNTS TO, THEN," Ireland said, "is that the three cousins are broke. Why is that? The family—"

"The family money went to the Bryndel line: My sister Sibyl."

"The other branches of the family didn't get a dime?"

"Oh, yes. But not enough—the way they played it around, for two generations."

"Charles' wife said she married him after he got his money. What did she mean?"

"That was a piece of the Bryndel fortune he and Harold and Hebe came into before May's mother came of age. It's gone by now. Naturally, they're waiting now for what I'm going to leave. Not as much as they hope, I'll tell you, and—"

"How did they come to get a piece of the Bryndel fortune? Do the other branches come in for a regular cut from time to time?"

"No. It's very involved; certain amounts in trust were originally devised in such manner that certain percentages accrued—"

"Did you get a cut at the same time?"

"No. I—"

"What was the date of this payment to the others?"

"Why, I don't remember exactly. Sometime in—1928, I'd say. About then."

"Before Judge Krofft was removed as administrator of the Bryndel estate?"

Dr. Pine looked at him sourly, chewing his tongue, and said: "I think it was. Yes." He seemed about to say something else, but kept still.

Ireland said, "I see. . . . One other thing we want—"

"You get yourself all wore out," Kistry said.

"Never too tired to talk," Dr. Pine said sharply. "What is it?"

"Shrikes," Ireland said.

"Eh? What about shrikes?"

"Whatever you know about them." The Sheriff appeared to be as puzzled as the old man about Ireland's purpose. Ireland walked to a rolled panel hung against the bookshelves and pulled it down, revealing life-size colored prints of birds. There were other panels near by, and Ireland searched through them until he found a pictured shrike.

"The murderer has taken a shrike for his totem," Ireland said. "You can't fight a thing until you know what it is." He handed a long pointer to the old man. "Give us a lecture."

DR. PINE PASSED ON the pointer to Kistry. "Take this damned thing. I don't need a stick. A lecture? If I gave you a lecture on birds, I'd start with the *Ardeopteryx*, and I wouldn't get to the shrike for a hundred and forty million years, when a shrike got itself stuck in the La Brea tar-pits in California, and died and was fossilized so we may have his bones today—one of his earliest appearances that we know of, and that was twenty-five thousand years ago. Before I'd get from there to the present, I'd go over the earth, among a couple of hundred species of shrikes, and among other things I'd tell you about the pallid shrike, *Lanius lathora*, that figured in the Parable of the Pharaoh when the Shepherd Kings sat in Egypt. Why, it would take a week."

The old man's eyes glinted with dry humor. The sun was lower in the sky, and a block of brilliance fell across the room from the window and illuminated his worn face.

He said: "I'll give you an introduction: that's all you can assimilate. Could you tell a shrike about men in ten minutes?"

He chuckled, shoving his white wig down on his forehead to shade his eyes against the sun. Kistry moved with a solicitous sickroom tiptoe tread over to the panel of bird prints and tethered it at full length and stationed herself by it with the pointer.

"To begin with," Dr. Pine went on, "there are only a few species of the bird in this country. Eight, to be exact. Only two of these have ever been reported from the neighborhood of this farm—Northern shrike and migrant shrike, and the migrant is rare. The Northern shrike nests in the Arctic and comes down here in the winter, stays from October, roughly, to May, but it's irregular."

The Sheriff, Ireland saw, was dutifully taking notes.

"The Northern shrike, which is the one I shall consider, being a local visitor, is a decently large bird, about the size of a robin. It was a Northern shrike that was left at the door of my New York house last week. Upper parts gray, wings and tail black, tailfeathers tipped with white, grayish black lores distinguishing him from the loggerhead shrike of the South, with black lores."

The Sheriff, tripped on his notes, said: "Lores?"

Kistry pointed to the picture, to a line connecting the bird's eye and beak. The touch of the pointer loosened the panel from its hook, and it rolled up with a bang, and Kistry dropped the pointer.

"Kistry," Dr. Pine said irritably, "get out of here."

"I won't do it again, Dr. Pine, honest. I'm just still jumpity. I'm all needles and thread."

Ireland said: "What species was the shrike at Mrs. Bregan's body?"

"That was a loggerhead. The one hung up beside Harold was a migrant."

"The shrike is a songbird; I've never heard the Northern shrike's song; but Brewster, I believe, says it's as musical as a catbird's. Supposed to be something of a mocker too. Well, all songbirds are. They're not born with the songs of their families in their throats; they learn them. Should be able to learn others as well. Enough do.

"The shrike is unique among songbirds in that he kills other birds for food, in the manner of a hawk. He also eats grasshoppers, snakes, lizards, and so forth. Some authorities tend to play down his bird-killing habits and others emphasize them. Some say he kills practically no birds but English sparrows, and others say he kills everything up to and including robins. For my own part, I have seen the Northern shrike kill varieties of Passerines, including warblers, creepers and whatnot; and he certainly isn't going to get much in the way of insects and snakes around here—not around here in the winter. To put it mildly, chickadees and snow buntings are more common.

"Consider his beak. Kistry, point out his beak for the Sheriff. It is strong and hooked and notched. Got a tooth in it, in a manner of speaking. Makes it easier for him to carry his prey.

"Now observe his feet. Kistry, point out his feet for the Sheriff. Songbird's feet, weak as a sparrow's.

"A hawk strikes with his talons, and carries with his talons, and tears his food apart with his talons.

"But when the shrike kills, he kills with his beak—usually on the wing. He's fast as lightning; he travels fast and straight, flapping hard, when he's attacking. A feathered bullet. A small bird can outdodge him but can't outrun him.

"When he overtakes his prey, he strikes it on the head with his beak, kills it, picks it up in his beak—sometimes catches it before it hits the ground—and flies away.

"Because his feet are too weak to help tear up his food, he hangs his prey to a thorn, or a crotch in a branch, or a barbed-wire fence, or a lightning rod—any place it will hang, to hold it while he goes at it, with his beak. He usually eats no more than the head and foreparts.

"From this habit of hanging up his carcasses, he's been called the butcher-bird.

"Further, he hangs up excess food. Some observers think this is thrift; some think it is prodigality. I have seen him hang up prey and leave it to rot.

"The shrike lives alone. He never flocks up. In his hunting he behaves like the Accipiter hawk—the bird-catcher—the chicken hawk. You never see him sailing around in the sky looking for—"

"Well, sir, I don't know much about birds," Sheriff Burr interrupted pontifically, "but I've lived a good while, and I've always heard those big sailers called chicken hawks. If they aren't chicken hawks, what are they?"

"They're mouse-eaters. They're big, and they're slow. They couldn't catch a healthy bird to kill it. They don't taste chicken once in a blue moon."

The Sheriff said stubbornly: "I've shot many a one for a chicken hawk. I've seen many a one come to a dead chicken, when a farmer leaves it out for bait."

"*Buteonine* comes to any carrion, as do most birds of prey. And if you've shot many a one, you've taken many a coin out of the farmers' pockets. They're economically valuable birds. I realize farmers shoot them on sight. As they do owls! They've never taken the trouble to find out what these birds eat. Red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks used to be thick around here, but they're on their way out. And the field mouse, the farmer's real enemy, will increase. Well, *die Veldt ist dumm*, as Heine says, and farmers are no exception. And *Buteo* makes a handsome target. . . . Where was I? Stop that damned interrupting."

"The hunting of the shrike," Ireland said.

"Eh? Yes.

"Like the Accipiter, he lies in wait until his prey comes within striking distance and then dashes out at it. Usual-

ly he waits and watches from a perch on a high post or on the high limb of a tree. He is very patient.

"When he strikes, he throws himself completely into his work. He hurls himself to the attack at a speed of perhaps sixty miles an hour. The small bird flutters to escape—the shrike is upon it in an instant—there is a quick flurry, a dip in flight, and the shrike goes on with a dead bird in his beak—perhaps a feather floats to the ground at the scene of the kill. Once in flight, the shrike does not like to give up. Burroughs speaks of a shrike chasing a creeper round and round a tree. And finally getting him! Forbush tells about a shrike chasing a small bird through a picket fence. The small bird could fly between the pickets but the shrike was too large—but he didn't stop. He went into the pickets at top speed and fell senseless to the ground.

"It's not rare for a shrike to dash itself against a window-pane trying to get at a canary inside.

"As the shrike hurtles after his prey, he squeals. Shrill and metallic, a sound like a tin whistle.

"Because of his color or his hidden habits of the season of his range, the other birds do not seem to show the fear of him they usually have for birds of prey. It's an extraordinary thing. Perhaps it's the only case in which the small birds fail to recognize their enemy. This can't be dismissed as aggressive or alluring coloration; rather it is psychological and circumstantial disguise.

"He has a curious trait of flight: He flies low to approach his perch and then shoots upward to it—post, limb, whatever it is—at the last minute—as if he doesn't want to be seen any more than necessary. Which is doubtless true.

"In my own opinion, he is a vicious, cruel, solitary, implacable, murderous machine. I've seen him tear the head almost off a junco with one blow. In my opinion, he kills without mercy, with delight, with hot malice, kills more than he needs to eat, kills whatever comes within range, kills for the thrill of killing, for a blood-lust, kills like the weasel, for the satisfaction of an emotional need."

The old man got out his handkerchief and pushed back his wig and wiped his face. The light had gone from him and left him dull and exhausted. The Sheriff had stopped writing and sat at the desk looking pensively at the pictured shrike on the panel.

The door opened, and the deputy said, "Mr. Ireland—" and Louise appeared at the deputy's shoulder and put her hands against his arm and moved him aside enough to give her entrance.

Her eyes were calm in her brown face. There was an abnormal composure about her. She stood inside the door, still and taut, looking deliberately around the room until she saw Ireland.

Ireland started forward. He was shocked at the change in her.

She said quite clearly, "Please come and help me, Sam. I think Dad's trying to kill Steve."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



IRELAND reached Charles' room ahead of the others; there was a resounding crash inside that jarred the door under his hand; he threw the door open and saw Steve sprawling in the wreckage of a smashed chair, struggling to get up, and Charles leaping for him like a tiger; Ireland lunged across the room, tackled Charles around the middle and slung him back and held him. Charles got one hand free and fought like a maniac, hammering his fist down in repeated blows against Ireland's head and shoulders; Ireland grunted and shifted his hold and spun the man around and locked his arms behind him to apply pressure. The pain from this

lock, as Ireland knew by experience, was exquisite, but Charles made no sound other than his heavy breathing; his plunging efforts to free himself did not lessen.

The Sheriff had scraped the fuse, Ireland thought, and somehow Erling had touched it off: the gentleman shell had loosened and cracked and then blown sky-high, and the animal beneath—that was man—had come out.

The others were crowding into the room now, and Charles suddenly went quiet in Ireland's grip and Ireland released him. Charles reached back with his hands to find the wall and lean against it, and he rested with his head down and his mouth wide open, gulping air.

The Sheriff, a trickle of tobacco juice escaping in his excitement to run down his chin, was helping Stevie to his feet. He said to his deputy: "Just put an iron on Mr. Bregan there, Dana. He's under arrest."

Steve shook his head and tried to talk. He was spitting blood. His round good-natured face had taken some punishment, Ireland saw: evidently Charles was not unfamiliar with his dukes. Stevie's mouth was cut, there was a cut under one eye, running blood, and the eye was swelling; his left ear was torn and there was a gash on one leg, received somewhere, from a splinter of the broken chair possibly, that had filled his shoe with blood. His shirt-tail was pulled out and his coat was ripped.

"No," Erling said. "No."

"We've got a charge for him now," the Sheriff said grimly. "We'll just take him into safekeeping."

"No," the fat man repeated. Pink bubbles of blood burst at his lips when he talked. "I won't sign any complaint."

Dr. Pine began to hiccup. He was holding himself erect on Kistry's arm. Louise at his other side. Isabella and Hebe and George were at the door behind them, drawn in alarm by the racket. Miami, round-eyed, was craning to see around them.

"The girl said he was trying to kill you!" the Sheriff exploded.

"Just a—a fight," Erling said. "I started it."

DR. PINE SWORE AT HIS HICCUPS and dispatched Kistry for his paper bag.

Charles said flatly, without raising his head: "If I see him again around here, I will kill him."

"That settles it," the Sheriff said. "That settles it, sir. Dana, take him to the car."

"I won't prefer any charge," Steve insisted. "There won't be any more trouble; I'm leaving here immediately. If you want me to stay for questioning, I can live in the village. It was my fault. Everyone was overwrought, that was all." He wiped his mouth. His eyes peered surprisedly over their rolls of fat at the blood on his hand.

"Ireland," Dr. Pine snapped, hiccuping, "take her out of here."

Ireland saw Louise close her eyes, and he reached her side and put his arm around her waist.

Isabella made way for them out of the room. She said: "Can't I help?"

Ireland shook his head. Behind him he heard the Sheriff say heatedly: "I intend to get to the bottom of this if we stay here all night!" and he heard Dr. Pine's voice raised in some barking pronouncement. He took Louise on into her room. She followed like a child, holding his hand.

Ireland said, "Sit down," and she sat on the edge of the bed.

He stood over her, plucking his lip. "I can get Isabella or someone to come in and put you to bed."

She said quietly: "No, thank you. Just let me rest a minute." Her eyes were lowered.

There was a fireplace in the room and a basket of wood. The window was up and the spring afternoon was brisk. Ireland closed the window and turned his attention to the fireplace.

He said nothing. He waited for the girl to speak. The lid was blowing off. . . . If the Sheriff didn't throw him a curve by some premature action— He curbed his impatience, the urgency he felt, and knelt stolidly before the fireplace, carefully building up the blaze.

He heard Louise rise from the bed and cross the room to stand at his shoulder, looking down at the newborn threads of fire.

She said: "Sam. . . . Sam, if Dad didn't have an alibi for his time last night, he would be arrested for—for Laura's murder. Wouldn't he?"

Ireland sat back on his heels. "Yes," he said. "He may be yet." With the fire tongs he rearranged a stick of wood, and flame leaped along its edge.

IT WAS A BLOW, and it shook her. She looked down at him uncertainly, judging the honesty of his words. She was a little afraid of him, Ireland thought. She had these things to conceal, and she was not sure how much he had learned; and in respect to this, he had become the enemy.

"That's the way it is," Ireland said, "if you want the truth."

She said: "I do. Oh, I do." She turned her head away and sat down in a deep leather chair. She said: "My nerves are all just screaming at me. I don't know what to do."

The fire was under way in good order, and Ireland sat on the floor and leaned his back against the bricks of the fireplace.

He said: "You're a nice kid, Louise. You shouldn't be mixed up in this."

"I'm not nice. I'm—I'm as rotten as all—" Her teeth bit into her lip. The black fringe of her eyelashes was wet.

"Get it out of your system," Ireland said.

She gave her head a little shake and did not answer.

She said at last: "Will the Sheriff arrest him now? Tonight?"

"For beating up Stevie? I don't think so."

"When they started fighting, they—Dad said he would kill him. Not mad, like he was swearing, but he just—simply said it. And I couldn't make him stop hitting him. He hit him and knocked him down, and he wouldn't wait for Steve to get up, but he would pick him up and hit him again; and it sounded like—like splattering an apple. I—he meant to kill him!"

Ireland said: "Anyone in a fight means to kill the other guy. But it's hard to do with your fists."

"I suppose so. . . . I—" Her hands were in her lap. Her fingers twined together incessantly. She said: "Sam, tell me the truth: It isn't possible that Bertha Arriven really killed—really killed Laura, is it?"

Ireland said: "I don't know."

"But you don't think so?" She went on: "And after—right after—that it should happen right after—Dad and Laura quarreling like that yesterday—and saying the things they did—and—it would be too much coincidence for Bertha to just happen to—to murder Laura just at that time, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it?"

Ireland said: "Do you think your father did it?"

"No! I—he couldn't have! I know he couldn't have! I was with—"

"You were in the living-room twice," Ireland pointed out. "To the telephone."

"I couldn't have been away from him for more than five minutes! Dad wasn't gone from the house until you came back and told us what had—what had happened; I know he wasn't; I was with him when we came in, in the afternoon, with Steve, and we saw you, and—and Laura—on the porch, and we stopped downstairs for—for an hour or so, and Steve mixed drinks and we were all there together, right in sight. And when we came upstairs, Dad went in his room, and took a shower and changed—that door there between our rooms was open—"

and he was feeling good from Steve's old-fashioned, and I could hear him singing, and sometimes he would yell something in to me, and I'd answer him. . . . I know where he was every minute, except for the two times I ran through the annex to answer the telephone, and even if he'd been gone during that time, he couldn't possibly have gone clear back to the woods, and found—found them there in the dark—and stolen Ike's pick before he left—and—it's just impossible! He couldn't have done it, Sam! I know!"

But, Ireland thought, she almost believed that somehow, by some magic, he had done it. She was trying desperately to convince herself, not him.

Ireland said: "No, he couldn't have. Not if you're telling the truth."

She looked surprised. "The truth? Oh, but it is—Sam, it is the truth. You've got to believe that!"

"Yes," Ireland said. "I do believe it."

"But the Sheriff—the Sheriff doesn't, you mean."

"Well, he has to go over the situation first with the county attorney. If they decide they can break down your story—make a jury doubt it, that is—they might hazard an arrest."

"You mean, make me appear—you mean, say I was an accomplice?"

"That's about the size of it, yes."

"Could they—would they have any chance—with no more of a case than that? If they didn't have the weapon, or—"

Ireland said: "I can answer that if you want me to."

"Yes, I do." Her voice was low, her eyes large, as she waited for him to speak.

He said: "They'd have a damned good chance."

The firelight played on the gypsy darkness of her face. She said: "But—"

"The one thing in your favor is Erling's corroboration. He said he looked in at your room and heard Charles' voice through the door of his room. But that corroboration doesn't account for all the time under consideration. It would give them trouble, anyhow. Except for that, they would have a very good case."

"But you don't think—"

"I don't think so because I believe you. That's one reason, at least. But as far as the Sheriff is concerned, the dice right now are against your father—and you—so he thinks you're lying. And everything he turns up from now on will make it worse. For example, Charles won't talk about the trouble he had yesterday with his wife. Or rather, he evades it—with some malarkey about his drinking. Well, it's only a matter of time until the Sheriff turns up the facts of it. When he does, it will look that much worse because your father tried to conceal them."

Louise hesitated, and said simply: "It was only that they decided on a divorce. It had been—it had been coming for a long time."

Ireland said: "I supposed that was it. A divorce over what? Isabella?"

SHE WAS PUZZLED. "Oh. . . . Oh, no." She almost smiled. "That's been over for a long time—I'd almost forgotten about it. It—it wasn't much, anyway. Dad isn't Isabella's type." The half-smile appeared again.

"Who is?"

"Harold, really. Or George." This time the smile was unconcealed. "Dad really thought he was quite mad about her for a little while, you know, and she wasn't the least bit interested in him—oh, he was very serious; he wanted to marry her, so Laura said once. And he was terribly angry that she should ignore him for someone like Harold, or George, but he just didn't understand. I think it's only that Isabella's maternal, and I don't care if she doesn't look it. Or act it." Louise giggled. "And Dad knows she doesn't. I think if she'd just have about

fifteen babies, she'd settle down and live with one man forever. Any old man."

She was quiet for a time.

She said: "But I don't suppose it's ever that simple. Isabella is too beautiful. She is the loveliest thing I've ever seen. She's the kind men go completely bats over—and especially those awfully quiet or morbid or repressed poor old ducks, like George and Harold. I don't know how George and Hebe ever got up the courage to marry—or propose—whichever one of them did it."

"Hebe used to call George Lord Byron; you know, George Gordon, Lord Byron, and he had a clubfoot too, or something, and of course he's Hebe's dream man because he was a poet."

"Did you ever hear any of Hebe's poetry? Gosh, it even makes me blush now when I think of it. She never shows anyone the rarer items, but once when I was still in school and they were staying with us, I sneaked in her room and read them all. Mmm, my ears burn yet."

HER NERVES WERE easing off with the freedom of talk. She drew her legs up under her in the chair, and cupped her chin in her hand and watched the fire.

"It's funny about loving people. And—hating people. Mostly I think you don't like people just because they don't like you, and so you don't like them in self-defense, and that's why some people are so lonely, because they never go so far as to like anyone else first. . . . Laura was like that; and I didn't like her because she didn't like me—ever. She never liked anyone but herself. She wanted money; she married Dad to get money, and almost ever since, all I remember is money, and talk about money, and trouble about money, clear up until—until yesterday."

"She didn't like me because I was a bother. And it took some money, to buy my clothes and pay my way through school, and—oh, Laura just resented me."

"Steve was always my favorite family. Or just my family. He's the only person I can remember who seemed to pay any attention to me. He was always laughing and friendly, and he went out of his way to take time to talk to me, and he used to send me the nicest gifts when I was in school, and the other girls were envious, and they all thought I had a multimillionaire uncle. I really used to wish that I was related to Steve, instead of belonging to Dad—and Laura."

"He seemed to know just what I always liked, and just what to do to make me happy. He was always so thoughtful and considerate. I grew up worshiping Steve."

Ireland said: "Did he visit you in France?"

"Oh, yes. He stayed with us a lot of the time. He used to take me sailing, when he was with us in Biarritz."

"He didn't give much time to his business."

He caught the change in her eyes.

He said: "I've had him looked up in New York. He keeps an office with his name on the door, but he doesn't seem to work. He spends his time in a customers' room in a broker's office. Loafs there. He seems to have an income, but no visible means of support. That's always interesting, so we checked further."

She whispered: "Then you—you do know."

"Well, I read that letter you burned in your room," Ireland said, stabbing in the dark, the half-dark. "I found a notebook of Erling's. There's enough to draw conclusions."

"That letter—Dad still thinks you came into the room and took it; I never did tell him I burned it. I was afraid you—somebody—might see it; Dad never thinks— But I guess I was too late."

"I never realized about Steve until I was—oh, until a year ago or so, actually. I thought he was really in business with Dad, and all their talk about money was just—just business. Then I heard Dad and Laura talking one day, about money and about Steve, and Laura was in a temper, and from what I heard, I began to understand

the things I hadn't understood before—that Steve was really no more than a blackmailer.

"It's strange, the way you think of things like that. I don't know—you usually picture a blackmailer sneaking in, a ratty little man, and demanding some money, very furtively, and sneaking out again. And here was Steve, and he was one of Dad's oldest friends, and he'd known Harold and Hebe for years, too; like one of the family; and here he was—extorting blackmail money from all of them.

"I can imagine it, the way it was. I know Steve used to have money, and lost it in 1929. And after he was poor, he probably got in the habit of borrowing from Dad, and gradually, so gradually they hardly knew it was happening—

"I can see Dad saying something some day—something cutting—something about Steve's continual cadging, and Steve offended and losing his temper and reminding Dad that he hadn't always been so scrupulous about money himself. And suddenly both of them realizing for the first time what—just what the score could be: Blackmail.

"Dad realizing that he couldn't afford to anger Steve, because Steve knew this, and it occurring to both of them that if Steve should tell about it, he could cost Dad every penny he had, and not only Dad, but Hebe and Harold as well. . . . And after that—well, it just went on, and Hebe and Harold were gradually drawn in, I suppose, when Dad told them the way it was; and they all—well, they have all paid since.

"I doubt if Dad and Steve ever really spoke the word aloud—*blackmail*. They are the kind to overlook realities that aren't pleasant. I think as the time passed they even managed to sort of hypnotize themselves into forgetting it *was* blackmail. . . . They were so particular to always speak of it as business. Business!

"Steve kept that office of his, and he corresponded with Dad about—business. He never wrote of anything but money, and it sounded innocent, except a few times, like that one letter you saw, where Steve had got out of patience with Harold, because nobody could get any money any more except Harold—from Isabella; and Harold will never do that until Steve drives him to it, and so of course there were always arguments and scenes; Dad and Harold, and Dad and Laura. . . .

"It's always been money. I've never heard anything but money. Finally, yesterday, when Dad asked her again to sell that little piece of real estate that was in her name—and she told him she had had enough and was through.

"I know she was in the right more than Dad, if you could say there was any right in it, any place—but I never felt so sorry for Dad in my life. I never knew a person could make just—words sound so ugly. It was horrible. It—it made me sick. I never wanted to have to look at her again. But I wish I'd—I wish I'd spoken to her last night on the porch. I'll never forget that now."

IRELAND SAID: "SO TODAY Steve's business went up the spout."

"Oh, they weren't fighting about that. Dad heard Steve ask me to go away with him; and he—he seemed to lose his mind. I never saw him like that."

Ireland frowned. "Steve asked you to marry him?"

"No, he only meant to take me away from here—from Dad."

She faced Ireland and said frankly: "He meant he thought Dad murdered Laura. Dad overheard him, and understood what he meant, and that's what made him so furious—the idea of Steve wanting to take me away from here, away from living with a father who might be a murderer. . . . I really thought Dad was trying to kill him."

She was still for a while, and then said: "No, I think Steve's business will go right on, as long as— That was why he tried to keep the Sheriff from doing anything—from arresting Dad for fighting him, because he's trying

to keep everything from falling apart; he still hopes that perhaps things can stay as they were, and that no matter what happens, he can protect himself. . . . Of course he won't give it up if he can possibly help it.

"It's funny. . . . It's so clear what a—a rat Steve has become, when you think of him objectively; but I do still like him—it's almost as if he is two people, and one of them I would like to see in jail, and the other one is still the old Stevie, just the same as when I was ten, and I have never—never put the two of them together; and neither has Dad, really, I imagine. Only Laura did. She hated Steve. But she never had liked him, for as long as I can remember. But she never actually liked anyone."

Ireland said: "What is he blackmailing your family about?"

She wavered between continued honesty and the last vestiges of her fear.

Ireland said: "I can't help you without the facts."

She said in a small voice: "This is the first you've said about helping us."

Tossing another piece of wood on the fire, Ireland stood up, brushing his hands. He said: "Look, get it out of your head that this is for nickels and dimes. Steve's business may be, but this is murder. I'm interested in finding the murderer of your stepmother. You say your father did not do it, and I believe you. But I've told you the law doesn't.

"And when the police turn up the rest of this mess—" Steve's business, the facts of the argument between Charles and Laura yesterday—I don't have to diagram it for you to see that you and your father will be in damned bad shape. The fact that according to my book Charles is in the clear won't cut any ice with the police.

"I'm not interested in extortion or the skeletons in anybody's closet, except as it affects finding a murderer who is still at large—and who may kill again. I'm working against the fear of everyone in this house, and I'm working against time.

"The best help I can give you is to turn up the truth—and make it fast. You're no more worried about what the Sheriff might do than I am. I've already gone so far as to withhold from the Sheriff the information I already had on Steve—information that added up to what you've been telling me. I'll keep on withholding it as long as I think necessary. After that, it goes to the authorities. Understand that I'm not making any guarantee of confidence. I'm telling you that it's up to you if you want to forget about blackmail and think about murder, and give me the help you can. It's up to you to write your own ticket.

"A matter of blackmail," he went on, "can fall in any direction, but it's always limited by the people concerned: a Prohibition politician could be blackmailed for taking a drink of sherry; the average ward heeler could be blackmailed for nothing short of murder; it's a consideration that provides a base of operations. And when blackmail has to fit three individuals, Charles, Harold and Hebe, the sum of possibilities is narrowed in geometric proportion.

"With this to start from, it doesn't take much investigation to shake out the story—the only story—that will fit these three individuals—and blackmail. In 1928 they obtained some money from the Bryndel estate—the only event that I can find that concerned all three of these cousins at the same time and in the same way. I don't know how Steve found out what they had done, but in his position as an old friend of Charles' and the rest of the family, it's easy to believe that he would have a pretty good idea of what was going on, even if he wasn't particularly curious.

"At any rate, he knew that your father and Hebe and Harold had stolen money from the Bryndel fortune."

"Yes," Louise said, with final decision. "Yes, of course. It's silly to— But I don't know exactly what it was, Sam. I just always understood that they had managed to get some money from the estate that they shouldn't have had—while Uncle Hector was in South America, and after Bertha had been sent away, and a man named Judge Krofft was handling the estate, and he was crooked, and so I suppose they arranged some sort of illegal deal with him—there was no one at all to stop them. May's mother was only about eight or nine years old then."

"How much did they get?"

"I'm not even sure of that, but I think it was a lot. You see, the Bryndel fortune used to be something like forty or fifty million dollars, and of course it depreciated through the years from several reasons—bad management, mostly, I guess; and it was almost wiped out in 1929. It has increased since then, I think, and it amounts to about eleven million now. But that leaves room for an awful lot to have disappeared. I'm sure Dad must have got at least a million in 1928, because he and Laura lived like royalty for ten years, until it was gone, and of course there was Stevie. . . . I don't have any idea how much he's got altogether from Dad and Hebe and Harold. But I might be way wrong. It might have been a great deal less, or even a little more."

Ireland said: "That's all you know about it?"

"Honestly, Sam. And it's really guesswork. . . . I never— I never asked. I've never spoken of it before to anyone. This is the first time I've ever said anything aloud about it, and—" She looked at him with a shamefaced and unhappy smile and said: "I'm like Dad that way, I guess. It seems to be some childish idea that as long as you don't mention it, it isn't real."

He was convinced she was telling the truth—as she knew it. But she hadn't allowed herself to think about it, which was probably the reason she had never seen the rest of the truth. If you close your eyes to a toad, you will never see a snake.

He said: "Well, I can't say definitely what the county law will do. My guess is that your father will be arrested within three or four days. Probably they'll wait until after the funeral. And they may pull you in with him; they may not." He stood in thought. "In the meantime—"

There was a slam and a bang and a thunder of feet; the door burst open and Louise cried: "Hatch!"

Hatch was in the room, and Louise was in his arms, and the dust of his explosive passage was settling behind him. His nutmeg-grater voice said: "What the hell they been doing to you, baby?"

LOUISE WAS LAUGHING and crying and hugging him. She said: "You weren't here, that's all."

"Ah," Hatch said, very tenderly. "What about that guy Erling? What has he done? Do I break that guy's neck?"

"Just stand here," Louise said. "Just be here, Hatch, you big baboon! Don't ever go away."

Ireland left the room and went downstairs. Outside in the yard the Sheriff and his deputy were helping Erling into the Sheriff's car.

"I'm laying off Mr. Bregan," the Sheriff said, "for the time being. They say they were fighting over Mr. Erling paying attention to Mr. Bregan's daughter. Ayah, well, maybe they were. What did the girl say?"

"She's hysterical," Ireland said.

The Sheriff turned his head and spat, with some satisfaction, Ireland thought, into the mud and grass. He drew Ireland away from the car to tell him he was leaving his deputy Dana in the house on guard.

"He's a good boy," the Sheriff said, shifting his chew reflectively. "He's cool and handy, and he'll do what you tell him. I don't want Mr. Bregan to make a move we don't know about."

Isabella was at the Sheriff's car talking to Erling when they returned.

She said: "His leg is beginning to look bad. Go right to a doctor, Steve."

Erling grinned weakly. His beaming face had lost much of its gusto. He winced when the Sheriff touched the makeshift bandage over the gash in his leg.

He said to Isabella: "I won't be able to dance, I guess."

She reached out impulsively and took his hand. "It will be all right. Good-by, Steve. . . . And I'm sorry."

"Nothing for you to be sorry about," Steve said. And he said with a partial return of his old-time jollity: "Good hunting, Ireland!"

Ireland said, "Much obliged." He walked to the house with Isabella. The top of her head came to his shoulder, and he looked down and saw her hair tied back with a pale blue ribbon. Splinters of gold shot from her hair in the evening sun. *Alice in Wonderland*, Ireland thought, but very nicely grown up. He searched his pockets for a cigarette.

"ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A CIGARETTE?" she said. "I have mine." She passed him a handsome leather case. Ireland took a cigarette from it and, deep in thought, absently dropped the case into his own coat pocket. Isabella, busy with concerns of her own, did not notice. She said, "Goodness!" and sighed. "I would never have dreamed it of Charles."

"Any gentleman slips his trolley now and then," Ireland said.

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I mean the way he can fight and hit. Stevie will never look the same again. I think there's a bone broken there by his eye. It's terribly swollen."

Harold was on the couch in the living-room, wrapped in his quilt, and as they entered he was saying: "I've always said Charles should be psychoed."

Hebe was reading and knitting simultaneously, and George was lounging in a big chair in a corner of the room, puffing gently at his pipe.

Hebe said gently: "I am more inclined to believe it is something greater than Charles himself. A curse has come upon this family. Oh, I sincerely think so. Violence and death—all the horrors. . . . And we all know it really, deep in our souls. Because here we sit, and simply wait. We are entirely helpless. We are in the hands of a Power, an Evil Power. I do believe that. Why is it so incredible? I'm glad young Hatch has come. I'm so relieved for poor Louise."

"If everyone was psychoed regularly, the world would be better off," Harold said. "I can feel the repressions coming back stronger and stronger every day. As soon as I get back to town and get psychoed again, they will go away. Wait and see."

"I've got to go into the village," Isabella said. "Anyone want to go along?"

George looked up at her, and Ireland saw the flame of worship and pride and desire that lived for a moment in the little man's eyes; Isabella smiled at him, her lips red and satirical, warm and knowing and amused. It was not, Ireland thought, a great deal different from the smile of an indulgent mother for her child.

"I told you I'd go with you," Harold said peevishly. "I've got to have some air. I'm smothering."

Ireland went on upstairs. In the library he saw Kistry, in her white starched dress, stooping over Dr. Pine's liquor closet. He cleared his throat, and she came up startled and spilled the drink of whisky in her hand.

As he passed Charles' door, he heard Dr. Pine inside laying down the law to Charles; he listened briefly and heard nothing but profanity. . . . Telling Charles of the fate worse than death, Ireland thought. . . . When he entered his own room, he found that someone had been there before him.

Efforts had been made by the intruder to leave no look of disturbance, but the intricate pattern of articles Ireland left in and about his desk, as a matter of customary caution, was changed: mute evidence of a painstaking search.

Ireland swore aloud and took the time to go patiently over his belongings. There was a great many things to be done, and time was valuable.

He spent a long half-hour on a careful check-up; and when it was concluded, his eyes were light and the lines of his face were drawn.

Nothing was missing but the bird he had brought up from New York—the shrike that had been mounted beside Harold's unconscious body.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



IRELAND moved to the empty room next the nursery after dinner. Isabella and Harold had come back in the mud-splattered Buick at dark, Harold shaken and white from the exertion of the outing. He had said throughout dinner that it wasn't his skull that hurt him, but his subconscious. He was developing an entirely new kind of complex, he said. His psychoanalyst would be astounded when he heard of it.

Ireland could hear them now in the rooms to his left, moving about. Harold was going back to bed; his new complex involved sleep, Harold had explained. He couldn't get enough sleep. It was because his struggling subconscious was freed in sleep, of course. He had once had insomnia, he said, and now that his subconscious was gaining in vitality, he had somnia, proving beyond question that in his subconscious lay the root of his health.

It was dark, and Ireland sat at his window, his lamp turned off, and watched the Northern Lights. He held in his hand the envelope of threatening letters from Bertha, the shrike-woman. He knew them by rote. He had them classified. There were eleven addressed to Harold, six to Hebe, two to Charles one each to Isabella, Mrs. Bregan and George. None to Dr. Pine; none to Louise. Letters . . . birds . . . murder.

The structure of the crime; that was the key. By the structure was revealed the form. The structure alone, the skeleton, was within the reach of the investigator. From it, reconstructions could be made. With the right bone in the right place, the structure identified itself. But it was necessary to know the bones, know them beyond doubt; and the bones were many things, from the call of a bird to the sight of a man's soul glimpsed in the flash of a moment.

A whistling bird—the tin-whistle shriek of a shrike. Shriek of a shrike, wink of a skink. The loon a buffoon and the howl of an owl. Uncle Hector had been going to the woods to visit the barred owl and hoot at it. It would be quite a sight to see Dr. Pine stumping through the woods on his bandy legs, laughing like a barred owl.

The shriek of a shrike—the beckoning call Harold had followed to the darkness of the courtyard, and Mrs. Bregan had followed to her death!

Ireland had walked through the park with Hebe, and a bird had followed them, calling; and Hebe had heard it again the night after it had called to Harold.

The letter said, "*Harold will, or,*" and the explanation from Louise had been less than satisfactory, for Dr. Pine had spoken of a threat of worse than death. For swindling the Bryndel heiress out of a paltry few million? Could it have been as much as that? Not likely. It would have lasted longer. Perhaps a million all told, to be divided among Charles and Harold and Hebe and Judge Krofft. And who else? Stevie? And—to the cousins it would not have been stealing, fraud or conspiracy at misfeasance; they would believe they had a moral right to a further share in the fortune. Grandfather Pine had been as much

their grandfather as the Bryndel heiress' grandfather. Prison, for an intra-family glom like this? Was that Dr. Pine's fate worse than death? Unreasonable!

But Steve had sat with them at Bertha's bedside, Mrs. Bregan had said; and Bertha, thin and sick and taking nasty shots, and writing to Kathie . . . "*Your Aunt Bertha.*" She had realized she was sick, Charles had said, in her lucid periods, but in the grip of her delusions she had hated the family; and she had reason to hate them. Dr. Pine had said, plenty; or so she believed. . . .

If you admitted that the same person stole both the birdskins from Dr. Pine's study, then you had to believe the same person attacked both Harold and Mrs. Bregan. The Sheriff had it all clear in his mind, and he didn't want to confuse the issue by thinking about Harold. Ah, yes. Ireland had had it quite clear in his own mind before, and it was too bad that he now had to confuse the issue by thinking about Mrs. Bregan.

That the murderer was Bertha, as the Sheriff said, was flatly impossible. But most of the household believed with simple faith that it was possible; and as the Sheriff said, they stuck to their stories closer than chicken feathers to a dishpan. Well, was it impossible? In New York, no. The vacant houses beside Dr. Pine's residence could have harbored a raptorial five-foot shrike. The roofs could have been used for passage. Hiding could even have been found in the closed middle floors, despite frequent search, by someone who knew the house well enough.

But as for Bertha following them up here—it would seem that the Sheriff was right. And so the Sheriff suspected Charles for the patness of his alibi. He did not believe Louise, and Ireland did. But—

A STOLEN GUN—AN EMPTY GUN. Isabella and Charles and George and Harold. And someone called Kip. Hebe's poetry.

Mrs. Bregan talking on the porch and drinking whisky sours, and the vivid wretchedness of her eyes, and her pointed red fingernail picking a flake of tobacco from her lip—and the silence of Charles and Louise when she ventured, in her alcoholic bathos, to speak to them. Dr. Pine and Kistry, Kistry carrying a blanket and a folding chair, binoculars, and this and that. . . . No pick? Ike plodding around the house with a ladder and a hammer, and Hebe thrusting her raincoat over Mrs. Bregan's shoulders, and the slick shininess of the rubber coat under the beam of Dr. Pine's flashlight; the coat in a crumpled heap on the ground, the dead-leaf-carpeted, pine-needle-carpeted ground of the woods.

And the habits of the shrike: it lived alone, and the small birds did not recognize it for their enemy.

Blood-lust, Dr. Pine had said; an emotional need to kill.

And the shrike flew into the fence, and the small bird got away. . . .

And someone, or something, had walked across the hill against the Northern Lights, and Isabella had seen it, because Harold had annoyed her and the window had presented better company, and through it she had seen death walking home, but she could furnish no identifying suggestions, such as had Miami.

Such was the structure of the crime—and the fact that Louise was not incapable of lying because her brown eyes were honest; and the fact that Bertha Arriven had been injured by a cab, not in one; and the fact that—

The door between his room and May's nursery was opened, and Helen's voice said a trifle fearfully in the darkness:

"Hello, Irish? Are you in here?"

Ireland got up. "What is it?"

"Come and see."

Ireland followed her through her own room to May's playroom. She turned her head to say softly: "I just put

May to bed awhile ago. She hasn't gone to sleep yet. And I just found this."

She knelt, and pushed aside a small white chest of drawers, and disclosed a nest of May's toys that had been hidden under the chest. Among them was the stolen Bankers' Special revolver.

Helen looked up and sighed in serio-comic relief and vexation.

"She took it, of course. I'd never have found it if I hadn't seen her slipping something else under here this evening. Golly, just think—if it had been loaded and she had hurt herself with it! I'll give her the dickens about it tomorrow, but I'm the one that ought to be kicked. That's just the way these tragic accidents happen. You have to think, that's all. If Dr. Pine knew of it, he'd fire me. And I certainly deserve it."

"May wouldn't let him," Ireland said, engrossed in looking over the gun.

"You can say nice things, Irish, when you want to. And just look at the pile of treasures she's pushed under here. All these feathers. Dr. Pine is always giving her feathers and all sorts of bird things. She's got so that every time she hears a bird sing, she thinks it's Hector. He's going to turn her into an ornithologist before she knows her ABC's. Look at these: feathers strung on little cards. See here. '*PTARMIGAN FEATHERS*,' he's printed under these. '*Summer and winter feathers. The ptarmigan is a bird of Canada and Alaska, and the white-colored feather blends with the snow of winter and the dark-colored feather blends with the bare rocks of summer.*' As if she could hope to read or understand all that. And here, whatever this is: She must have brought it home from the woods today, when we went walking. What is it, anyway?"

Ireland took it and rubbed off the thin film of rust with his thumb.

"It's a tin whistle," he said.

"A what?" Her brows drew together at his curious expression. "What on earth was it doing in the woods?"

"You're sure that's where she found it?"

"Well, it was here in this little plate with these twigs she gathered up today, and I think—I think I remember seeing it in her hand on the way home. We only went walking around the house, and along the edge of the woods that come down there back of the garage. She was investigating everything, and she found a hollow tree—a stump—I remember because a squirrel ran out when she looked in, and she— Does it have anything to—"

"There's not much rust," Ireland said. "Could be from dew. It hasn't been out in the weather long. I'll go have a look at that tree."

"Wait, Sam—I'll get your gun and give it back to you now. I've got the little one again."

"Keep it. I don't know what shape the other one is in. I think the kid will be all right, but don't take chances. Don't leave her alone tonight. And keep that gun in your lap, Peabody."

SHE SAID RELUCTANTLY: "You ought to have something, if you're going to be out poking around in the dark."

It was good to have Peabody worried about him. She was a pretty worrier. Back in his own room he got his hat and started out, and stopped with his hand on the door.

Someone—Isabella, undoubtedly; Harold would be asleep by now—was quietly leaving Harold's room next door. The quick, hushed movement had whispered on past and disappeared before Ireland could open his door to look after it.

He looked at his watch. Ten-thirty.

Isabella—headed where?

Downstairs, the house was deserted. There was no sign of Isabella until, as he was searching the labyrinthine corridors of the house a second time, he heard a car out-

side and got out to the yard in time to see the Buick wallowing down the road toward the village, a pair of red tail-lights blinking out behind the line of maples.

Back in the house, Ireland found the deputy posted in a niche in the crooked hallway near Ike's quarters in the shed annex. Dana was asleep in a tilted chair.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



ELL, I'm here because I got to watch Mr. Bregan's door," the deputy said, when awake. "I can see it from here."

"You can see it from the landing on the barn stairway," Ireland said, "and you can watch the top floor at the same time. I've got to go out for a while, and I want that top floor under observation. Is there a dance in the village tonight?"

"Friday night?" Dana looked at him as if Ireland had a hole in his head. "There's always a dance Friday nights. At Fuller's Barn. Just this side the village, on the main road. Fuller put up that barn four years ago new, and he's paid for her right now by dances. She sure is a nice one, too. He don't use her for nothing but dances and hay. Ayah. He's got a gold mine in that barn. Ayah, a regular gold mine. Has dances all summer long. Right through from Easter to Halloween."

"Well, I want to get to town," Ireland said, "but I haven't got a car to use."

"That aint county gas in my truck," Dana said quickly. "I aint got any more gas in her now than enough to get home, and my coupons have run out until—"

"Why, I've got a gas ration book I'm not using here," Ireland said. "I could put in ten gallons or so."

"Ten gallons?" Dana said. "Man, take my keys. I'll set up there on the stairway."

He hesitated and pulled his bony nose in speculation.

"If there aint room in the tank for ten gallons, there's some cans in the back and you can put it in them."

It was not hard to find Fuller's Barn. The place was festooned with lights, and an acre or so of cars were parked around it. Ireland left the truck, whose gasoline gauge said *FULL*, and went up the long ramp to the big barn doors. Local wolves lounged along the railing of the ramp, youthfully smoking cigarettes and drinking pop and ogling the girls who paraded back and forth in giggling groups.

Inside, there was music and crowds, one crowd dancing, one crowd ranked around the walls watching, and another minor mob about a soft-drink booth.

The interior of the barn was tremendous, and it held more people than Ireland would have thought lived in the county. There were several differences between this crowd and a night-club crowd. In the first place, you could tell they were farmers because the men had red necks and big hands. But the principal thing was that everyone here seemed to be having a very good time indeed, in contrast to the dead pans to be seen around a night-club ringside. Ireland thought this over, and concluded that it was because here there were no waiters to impress.

He bought a ticket and went in as a dance ended. Everyone shouted and wiped off sweat. The music began again at once, with a bellow from a red-faced man on the bandstand that this was a *galop*, and the barn trembled to the dancing feet. A girl began to sing, in a pleasant voice, and the song sounded good, and loped along like a Morgan horse on a frosty morning. The kids, Ireland saw, were jitterbugging to it.

Ireland moved along the wall, feeling out of place in his expensively tailored sport jacket, and the city stiffness that went with it. He was watching for Isabella, and he saw her at last in a corner near the soft-drink stand, talking to Stevie.

The fat man's face was speckled with court plaster, and there was a bulging white bandage on one eye. He was, however, smiling while Isabella talked—smiling and nodding.

Ireland worked his way closer to them. Isabella handed Steve a white envelope. Erling nodded and smiled and put it into his pocket. Before Ireland could reach them, Steve had gone, hobbling away into the crowd, and Isabella was starting away in another direction. She was obviously looking for someone. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright, and she was having a good time here only because of being here; her yellow hair hung loose down her back, and she was wearing a modest checkered dress like a pinafore, and men dancing missed their steps watching her.

Ireland cut across the floor and intercepted her.

"Oh, Sam!" She seemed only delighted to see him. "I was looking for George. He came with me, and now I can't find him. . . . Have you ever been here before? Oh, this isn't a square dance now. You can fox-trot to this. Come on! I want to dance."

IRELAND PUT AN ARM around her. He said: "I see Steve made it." She was light in his arms, and she danced with an ease and grace that made Ireland feel clumsy beside her.

She said: "Do you follow everyone? I don't see how you can. Don't talk about those things now, Sam. I don't want to think about anything. Just look at all the grim Vermonters around us. Did you ever hear about the stiff-necked, close-mouthed Puritans that live in New England? I never have so much fun as when I come here. Most of the summer people go to a little barn dance of their own, where they have an authority on folk songs and folk dances—she's a social worker from Boston—to see that everything is just so, and they're so terribly earnest. . . . I hate things like that. This is real, and it isn't earnest at all. I don't want life to be any more earnest than it just has to be. . . . I just want life."

She laughed and said: "Let me borrow your handkerchief, Sam." The music stopped, and she unfolded his handkerchief and dabbed at her face. "Oh, golly, it's hot in here. I'm going to the little girls' room and powder my nose. Wait for me, Sam. If you see George, tell him to get out the car, will you? We've got to go soon."

Another dance was forming, sets for a square dance this time, and she was swallowed up in the swirling couples. Ireland left the floor, and the loud voice was bawling: "Take your places for the Frenchman's Reel!"

A fiddle ripped out a firecracker gliss' in warning: someone banged a drum; people yelled back and forth and laughed and ran over each other; a fat woman clipped Ireland with an All American running block, and a lanky character in a flannel shirt, with a jawful of eating tobacco that reminded Ireland of Sheriff Burr, gave him a hand and steadied him.

"Music aint started yet," he said.

Ireland made his way to the wall, and the fiddle cut loose, sizzling like grease in a hot skillet, and the loft boomed now to stamping feet.

The big voice shouted: "Now swing yo' hand, swing yo' hand—shake hands now and shake 'em purty, don't you mind if they're a little dirty! . . . Swing 'em right an' shake 'em left—hey, there, Perley, swing that gal till her hair turns curly! Now clap yo' hands one an' two—le's hear 'em, folks!—clap hands, right an' left, and right an' left, one an' two an' clap 'em three—"

George appeared at Ireland's elbow and spoke to him. He took his pipe out of his mouth and said with mild humor: "This is no place for me."

"Yes," Ireland agreed. "They jump." He got out a cigarette.

"It's like the parking lot of the Yale Bowl outside," George said. "I've been trying to get the car out, but it

seems we'll have to stay awhile. Someone put a truck right behind us. I wonder if—"

George suddenly snatched the cigarette-case from Ireland's hand, and Ireland looked at him in amazement.

"You got this from her," George said. His voice had changed and came out of his throat like the voice of a man who had been struck in the face. His fingers tightened on the leather case until it bent double in his hand, and he drew back his arm as if to throw the case from him, and as abruptly as the fury had come on him, it disappeared.

He said through white lips: "Sorry. Sorry—I forgot myself. . . . I'm afraid I've broken it."

He handed the case back to Ireland and limped away. One of the dancers bumped against him and he almost fell. He caught himself against the wall and stood a moment resting, his head down, his eyes on the floor, and moved on.

Ireland went out. He stopped at the door to light his cigarette.

"Gran' right an' left . . . left hand to corner an' come back—keep it goin' like a jumpin' jack! . . . Arches an' change, an' change on the stamp, change to a purty gal this time, boys! Ketch yo' pa'tridge if you can, an' throw her down in a fryin' pan! Arches an' stamp, an' change—"

Ireland drove into the village and found a filling-station open, had two of the five-gallon cans in the truck filled with gas, and drove back out to the farm.

He left the truck in the yard and walked around the garage and into the point of woods that here extended to the corner of the house.

The Northern Lights had crept up and now filled half the sky, fading the stars. The lights were reptiles now, rainbow-colored snakes twining and squirming among themselves, lazily flicking their tails.

Ireland searched along the fringe of the woods with this living light to guide him; when he found the jagged snag of the hollow stump, he flipped on his little flash light and shaded it with his hand and shot its faint pencil into the dark core of the stump.

The pick was there. Its head was crusted with blood. Ireland reached into the stump for it; he leaned over the edge of the stump, and the blood pounded in his ears, and he touched the head of the pick and scraped it with a thumbnail.

The blood on it was not yet quite dry. It was fresh.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



ANA was awake and reading a magazine. "No siree," he said. "Aint been a soul stirring. Been just as quiet as the grave."

Ireland snapped: "Are you sure? Have you been asleep?"

"I been awake every minute." The deputy began to be alarmed. "There aint been anyone in or out of Mr. Bregan's room or Miss Bregan's room or the top floor either, as much as I can see, and I aint heard anything any place. I been setting right here in the middle of the house, I sh'd think I'd know it if anyone—"

Ireland left him and went up the barn stairs three at a time. At the nursery Helen came to the door and called: "Who is it?"

"Ireland. Look at the baby. See if she's all right."

"There hasn't been anything—"

"Look at her." He waited, and in a moment Helen's voice returned and said: "She's perfectly all right. Shall I open the door?"

"Leave it alone. Stay where you are." He went on to Harold's door and knocked. There was no answer. He left and rounded a jutting corner, went down three steps to Hebe's door, and rapped loudly. Again there was no answer. He hammered on the door.

Hebe's voice said: "Yes?" It quavered. She sounded like an old woman. Like a witch out of "Macbeth." "Yes? Who is it?"

"It's all right," Ireland said. He went back to Harold's room and tried the door. It was locked. He threw his shoulder against it, and a panel splintered. He smashed in the panel with his fist and reached through to search for the key. It was not in the door. He stepped back and drove himself against the door. Another panel buckled, and he fell half through. He hauled himself on into the room and got to his feet and switched on a light. The deputy came running breathlessly down the passage to the broken door, wanting to know what was the matter. Someone else, at some distant place in the house, was shouting querulously.

Harold was lying half out of bed. His feet and legs were still tangled in the blankets. His head and shoulders hung over the edge of the bed, his body twisted by the force of a terrific blow. One outflung hand rested limply, knuckles down, on the floor. He was dead.

The shrike was perched on the headboard of the bed.

FROM THE NOTEBOOK of Hector Pine, Ph.D.
Saturday:

In all the tragedies of my later life, and there have been several, I have gone for comfort to the world of birds.

The soul of Saul was eased by David's harp. So would a glass of fine champagne satisfy a dry man. But to the lost desert traveler, agonized by thirst, come visions not of man-made wines but of cold mountain streams.

When next week the bobolink arrives to sing to me, I will hear not his melody only, beautiful though it may be; I will hear as well in its echo the timeless music of the Manitou. If you will, of God.

There is a Spanish proverb that the sun shines on the just and the unjust. As the birds sing. They do not sing for man; man is merely there to hear them. The bulbul sang as tunelessly for Judas as for Jesus. It is this universality, this complete apartness from man's own petty wish and will, that lends magic and majesty to the song of a bird, as it does to death.

Great personal troubles will tend to shorten your perspective, and the world will narrow down about you until it is seemingly made of nothing but your grief—and then on the song of a bird you may rise for one assuaging sublime moment to see vast worlds and vaster distances, and man a spot and your grief a speck—

Someone said—Emerson, I think; God knows, the Transcendentalists washed enough in the blood of the Lamb to get some of it in their eyes—that every place he looked in Nature, he saw the face of man. Or maybe it was the form of man—or the hand of man, or the nose of man, or possibly the hand thumbing the nose. Be that as it may, this conception is the modest plesantry inherent, beyond doubt, in every consciousness. When the trilobite ruled the earth, he certainly saw the trilobite in all Nature; as does the termite see the termite and the proboscis monkey behold the noble visage, of the proboscis monkey. The universe was not created for man, and from the other direction, man is not one with the life of the universe, or with Nature. Man is one only with the life of his species. Only in his own species lies his immortality, not in the universe at large; when *Homo sapiens* becomes extinct, the universe won't give a damn about it, any more than it did about the trilobite.

But man's consciousness is unique in that, glimmering behind the blindness of inherent egotism, there is the beginning of sight that will see beyond himself. And this is the beginning of his greatness. To see his surroundings not as man would see them, but as they are.

In other words, it is a gift of subjective humility. From all appearances, no other creature possesses this priceless pathway to a revealing point of view. But man can walk

upon it for the simple admission fee of hearing a robin sing, or looking at a star.

Or, for duller minds, there are more striking passages. Men have built skyscrapers, you say—do their towers dwarf the mountain? I could hide all New York City in the shadow of Mount Everest! But the lights—our lights have lit the world; on Broadway the night is brighter than the day, and you can see the glow of our great cities from here to here, and we will distort the night on the face of the earth! Do our electric displays rival the Northern Lights, the neon signs of the sky?

(The Aurora has been brilliant here the last two nights; even spectacular last night. Ike claims to have heard of a local belief that the Northern Lights excite nocturnal animals and even man if he ventures out into their glow. That has a primitive ring to it and I suspect Ike of making it up to amuse me. It may be that the Lights when exceptionally bright are the cause of some variation in the activity of nocturnal animals, for the simple reason that the night is then less dark.)

What a miserable creature is man—that I to lessen my sorrow would lessen myself.

The house is full of officials today. Two carloads of them, diverse men whose grisly business is the examination of crime. Did I once tell Ireland I wished to avoid police investigation because of the press notoriety that would ensue? He will laugh now if he thinks of it. Newspaper representatives have been about the place all day, even trying to enter the house, and it was with difficulty that the police finally drove them away.

What a complex it would have given Harold to have undergone this chaos and confusion! The poor devil is better off dead.

(We often say that about an old dog or an old grandfather, some useless thing, and we all believe it, too, except the old dog and the old grandfather.)

I have no idea what the Sheriff is going to do now. Charles talked to me sometime ago, raving with anger, and I gathered that the Sheriff has intimated that Charles might have murdered Harold because Harold had learned something concerning the murder of Charles' wife, of which the Sheriff seems still to hold the same opinion, that Charles is guilty of her death. This is baseless reasoning. The Sheriff disregards the shrieks mounted at the scenes of these murders, disregards the cumbersome method of murder—if Charles or anyone else but Bertha committed murder, would he not, for God's sake, use a gun, a knife, or poison? Only Bertha, in that horrible illness of her mind—

The Sheriff further ignores the fact that Charles was virtually under guard in his room last night at the time of the murder—with some theory about entrance through Harold's window via ladder; disregards the fact that not even the murder weapon—Ike's pick—has yet been found.

WHY THE DEVIL DO THEY befuddle themselves with these notions, that only waste their time and frantic efforts, while Bertha is—some place—preparing to come to us again?

Isabella is prostrate with shock. The Doctor has diagnosed her condition as hysteria and is, I believe, a little worried about her. Certainly improvement is doubtful as long as the household remains in this feverish state. Hysteria can be a very serious disease. It goes far beyond the smelling-salts stage that is usually called hysterical. It can cause death, by self-starvation, by an inability of the body to assimilate nourishment. It can cause the appearance of a false tumor. It can bring on blindness, deafness, paralysis, aphasia, and a number of other phenomenal symptoms, all false, all produced by the mind. The Doctor cautioned us all not to speak to her about Harold. In her present condition excitement might encourage her to some untoward action. What did she feel about Harold? It mystifies me. Her terrible anguish

now is the grief of a mother for a beloved child: the strongest grief in nature, as it can be the strongest hate.

Ireland has been in the village most of the day. He said he was telephoning and seeing a doctor. He questioned Kistry sometime ago in private (I found her drunk again last night when the household was aroused; that is the last time; once more, and I shall kick her out of my sight for good, if I live) and he left her looking shaken and apparently frightened. What did he say to her?

She has since disappeared some place. It is time for my coffee and she does not bring it.

I talked to Charles last night, after his row with Erling, and I understand that Erling has been blackmailing them. . . . About Bertha: Is there no end to the limit of her vengeance? And that damned Erling, to put to that infamous use the knowledge that he gained by friendship. He's not a puffin, that is an insult to a civilized bird, but a reptile. If he did not have hair and a single jawbone, you would not know him for a mammal.

And so tomorrow I reach my seventy-first birthday: the day that each year marks the beginning of the high pitch of the spring migration here, the day that each year I contrive to spend every possible minute of daylight in the field. The barn swallows are already here: cliff and bank swallows are due, and swifts, and the catbird that hunts in the lilac at the corner of the porch, and soon the ruby-throated hummingbird, with—

CHAPTER NINETEEN



IRELAND found the old man in his room, writing.

Dr. Pine said, "Eh?" and looked up vacantly. His wig lay on the desk, and he slapped it on his bald head and put down his pen. "What is it now?"

"I've got some word from the city," Ireland said.

"Well? What kind of word?" The old man brought a bottle of brandy out of his desk. "Here," he said. "You look the way I feel. If you need a glass, there's one in the bathroom."

Ireland found glasses and poured drinks for them both, and got out his cigarettes. He was still carrying Isabella's leather case. He wondered if George had given it to her.

He said: "We've turned up some information about Bertha Arriven."

"You haven't found her?"

"We've found the driver of the cab that hit her eight years ago. We've found one of the nurses from the Brooks. . . . One that would talk."

Dr. Pine drank his brandy and said nothing.

"I'm not a doctor," Ireland said, "so I asked one. It will take some time to get the details, but the general picture is clear—it's been clear for some time. Now we've got the proof."

Ireland finished his drink and sat down on an old couch that stood against one wall of the study. He was tired. The afternoon sun at the window hurt his eyes.

"You said something," Ireland said, "something about a fate worse than death for Harold. Erling has been blackmailing Harold and Hebe and Charles. Bertha, before she went to the asylum, was sick—thin; she wrote to Kathie that she was still having to take the shots. Nasty shots, as she called them.

"Then there was the time element. In 1927 and '28 you were in South America. In '27 Bertha lost her mind and was placed in the sanitarium. In '28 the three cousins made a raid on the Bryndel estate for a very sizable chunk of dough. In '29 the administrator of the estate was found to be crooked and was fired.

"The sequence starts with Bertha. Her position in the family, particularly in regard to Kathie, was one of trust. In everything except the legal status, she was Kathie's

guardian. Reasonable to assume she would protect the kid's interests as well as she could."

Dr. Pine, listening, his mouth drawn down, his chin working incessantly, looked up suddenly at the window and, as if in anger, jerked the shade part way down, throwing the room in shadow.

"She tried to do that," Ireland continued, "when she learned of the conspiracy between the cousins and Judge Krofft to rifle Kathie's inheritance. She probably threatened to carry a complaint to the District Attorney.

"So she stood squarely in their way, and there was nothing they could do but drop their plans—or make a pretense of dropping them.

"But someone got an idea for removing Bertha. Not murder—not with that set-up. Probably, first, someone suggested getting her committed to an insane asylum by the simple means of bribing some chickenfeed psychiatrist to kidnap her. But this would be too dangerous—as dangerous as murder.

"But then the idea came that she might go to an asylum willingly—if symptoms of insanity could be artificially produced.

"They can be, by injections of various drugs.

"They found a doctor to do this—for enough money. They probably called him in when she had a cold, or some minor illness, and he began the injections under pretense of treatment.

"Of course she sickened. She grew steadily worse, as the doctor's visits increased. She realized that something was wrong with her nerves, her mind—she couldn't help but realize it.

"The symptoms were those of dementia præcox, and that was the final diagnosis; and in the end she let the doctor put her away in his own hospital.

"It had worked very well.

"It's hard to say when she first began to suspect what had happened to her. Possibly when she heard—she had to hear sooner or later—that the cousins had successfully cut in on the Bryndel fortune after all.

"But now it didn't matter what accusations she might take to the authorities. She was a mental patient, and her word would not be considered.

"She was kept in the sanitarium for nine years. Probably by this time her mind had become permanently deranged, so there was no chance of her causing trouble any time, in the future. Or it may have got too expensive, keeping her there. At any rate, she was released.

"But she was not as helpless as she had seemed. At least enough of her mind remained to remember, enough to make a threat. So—she had a cab put on her. There was a time when it wasn't too hard to do that in town, if you had the money and could find the right connections.

"The cousins panicked and tried to have her killed. It wasn't the stolen money they were worried about now, but their crime against her. You're right when you talk about a punishment worse than death. A court would be inclined to be tough with people accused of such a crime as deliberately rendering a woman insane.

"They hired a torpedo, through a rackets cab line, and he caught her at a street intersection and ran her down in his cab.

"She was badly crippled, but she wasn't killed. And she seemed now to realize her danger—as soon as she recovered from the accident, she dropped out of sight.

"The cousins, still afraid, left this country and lived abroad. The situation rested like that until they were driven back home by the war. But when they did come back, Bertha's threatening letters began to appear."

HE GOT UP TO PUNCH OUT his cigarette in an ash-tray. He said: "That's it."

Dr. Pine grunted and turned in his chair to raise the window-shade a few inches and look out.

"Yes," he said at last, still watching morosely out the window. "Yes, you are quite correct."

"All right," Ireland said. "That's what I wanted. I'm turning this information over to the New York authorities."

Dr. Pine chewed vigorously, the wattles shaking on his neck. He gazed through the window, his eyes on the sunlight slanting through the new leaves of the elm beside the house.

"Of course," he said. "Of course."

Ireland turned to leave, and the old man stopped him with a gesture. He left the window and squared around in his chair.

He said: "I don't know what part you have given me in this story, as you have put it together. I can say you are essentially correct in everything you have said. Of course there is no point in my denying it. But for my own pride, or because of my own conscience, or what you will, I should like to clarify my position—if I can."

THE OLD MAN GOT the hiccups, and cursed and fumbled through his desk for the brown-paper bag. He blew into it until the hiccups stopped.

"It was not until Judge Kroff's peculations were discovered, after I came back from South America, that I suspected anything. And then it was only suspicion concerning Charles' and Harold's and Hebe's extra-legal manipulation of the estate. I had no idea at that time that Bertha's illness was not as it appeared. Neither did she—not until several years later. Oh, she had accused the family of trying to take Kathie from her—or take her from Kathie; but that had only been the depression of her state of mind talking, during her sickness. It was not until some years had passed that she got a hint from her nurse, and—

"But to my own actions. I confess that I could see something of their side of the picture in getting what they could of the Bryndel estate—although I should certainly have put a stop to their grab had I been on hand at the time. After all, it was through nothing more than a whim of my father's that the inheritance was not evenly divided in the first place.

"Because of this, and because exposure at the late date when I discovered the theft would not have brought restitution of the money, and because of—because of family pride, I suppose, and a repugnance at seeing the family affairs dragged through the public press, I did nothing.

"Now then: Bertha, as I say, at last realized that she had been made the victim of a—fiendish crime. Her first act was to write to Kathie—then going to school in Switzerland.

"Children grow up, you know, particularly wealthy children; and they forget how fond they might have been of nurses and poor relatives and other old family retainers of their childhood. And when the old family retainer has been a lunatic for years—

"Kathie disregarded the letter. I suppose, of all the things she endured, that hit Bertha the hardest. . . . And it's because of that, that I have been especially fearful for May's safety.

"Next, Bertha turned to me. I had talked to her several times; I visited her once a year while she was at the sanitarium. I had been fully convinced that she was suffering from the mental illness as presented. At first I doubted her story, of course—doubted it extremely. But I did mention it to Harold.

"His reaction made me suspicious. But I could not believe it. It was a thing too hellish. Nevertheless, from that time on my imagination found proof of the crime in everything they said, in their every action.

"So to my crime: It was a crime of omission, not commission. Instead of taking my suspicions to the authorities—and after all, they were only suspicions; they have never been more than half-confessions from Harold, who

was, I am sure, the prime mover behind the whole thing, it being my definite impression that Hebe and Charles only entered the conspiracy against the estate after Bertha had been sent away, and in fact might have been then innocent of knowledge of the crime. And I had no proof; I have no proof now that would stand in court. . . . Well, as I had done formerly, I kept still.

"To my everlasting damnation," the old man said, his voice trembling with sincerity, "I kept still! I have even done my best since to try to keep this family disgrace secret, as much as if it had been my own malversation. But my conscience wanted a sop. I did not rest until I had secured Bertha's release from that damned asylum.

"Now, Harold again—and that thug in a taxi, who tried to murder her: Harold's guilt would never let him rest. It was driving him mad—inexorably meting out to him the torture to which he had condemned Bertha. With Bertha free, he was frantic with fear, and so he attempted to arrange her murder.

"But again I had no immediate reason for suspicion. Again, even today, I have no proof other than my own intelligence—and Harold's subsequent behavior. He could never keep from giving himself away.

"Nevertheless, as I still felt my great debt—of omission—to Bertha, I paid her hospital expenses. And I sent her a check—a very large check, enough to keep her in comfort the rest of her life.

"And I had thought of doing more. Her mind failed badly with the accident, and I intended to see that she—but she left the hospital and disappeared, without letting me know.

"My check was cashed. That was all, until the letters.

"Now—her vengeance has come to us. I don't know how. I don't know how she has done it. I can only say that I believe the enormity of the crime against Bertha is its own answer to the riddle of the crimes committed here.

"Monster begets monster. Perhaps Bertha has actually become the shrike they convinced her lived in her mind."

The old man leaned his elbows on his desk and scoured his face with his hands, shoving his spectacles up on his forehead.

He said in an exhausted tone: "Where the hell is Kistry? I want my coffee."

There was a sound at the door, and Ireland swung around to answer it.

CHAPTER TWENTY



R. PINE said: "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"We're looking for Ireland," Hatch said. He was excited. The family was with him—Hebe and George, Charles and Louise.

Hatch said: "What goes around here, Inspector? The Sheriff tells us they've caught Bertha Arriven, and boils out like he's got a bee in his britches. What's up?"

Ireland said: "Come inside."

Dr. Pine said: "What is that? What is that you say?"

"The Sheriff said to talk to you, Ireland," Charles said. "If they've found Bertha, what did he mean by insinuating—"

Ireland said: "Sit down."

"Now look here, Ireland, my daughter and I have taken all the persecution we—"

"Shut up!" Dr. Pine roared. "Ireland! What the hell is this all about?"

"I asked the Sheriff not to shoot off his mouth," Ireland said irritably. "The case isn't—"

"Well, he has, and I want to know what they mean! What is this about Bertha?" Dr. Pine hiccupped once and snatched his paper bag, but the spasms didn't persist.

"They haven't got Bertha," Ireland said. "They should have her, by morning. She's down in the woods, and they've got the farm surrounded. She can't get away."

Their faces were startled chalk.

The old man half rose from his chair and slapped his palms on his desk and barked: "By God, I don't believe it! Where was she?"

Ireland leaned against a corner of the old man's desk and folded his arms. "The point is," he said flatly, "she isn't the murderer of Harold and Mrs. Bregan—she alone is not the murderer. That killer is not one individual, but several."

There was a change in Louise today, Ireland saw, that even Hatch's presence could not overcome: A beaten look, a look of sudden, shocking loss. Probably she had been talking to Charles, asking for the first time for all the facts of Steve's business—and Ireland had an idea Charles had told her, as a gentleman would.

Charles flushed now and said between his teeth: "I've told you and I've told the Sheriff—"

"I don't know what view the law will take," Ireland said. "I'm only giving you my own."

"When I say a group of persons are responsible for these murders, I mean the first step in their commission was taken when Bertha Arriven was declared insane. The second step was made with a taxicab."

Charles had sat down on the couch, and now he came to his feet, and George interrupted him equably, concerned with the stem of his pipe: "Let him go on. We have legal recourse against slander or—"

"I admit nothing," Hebe broke in, her pale eyes incensed and her hands a little panicky, without the soporific of her knitting. "Nothing, nothing!"

"Damn it," Dr. Pine squalled, "keep still! Ireland, you spoke of Bertha. I want to know what you meant."

Ireland said: "I mean you've been right in your belief that Bertha has come back to this family for vengeance."

"Vengeance is a powerful motive. With enough will to do a thing, anything can be done. Add to that an unstable mind, and that instability itself a constant reminder of the deed which cried for vengeance. At any price, vengeance, beyond life itself!"

"In 1936 Bertha Arriven was crippled. For a year after that she lived in a rooming-house, in a wheel-chair. She was traced from there to a small suburban hospital. She never left that hospital."

"But someone else did—a woman who was Bertha Arriven only in her spirit, and in her single-minded will for vengeance."

Dr. Pine fell to cracking his knuckles as he listened, his head tilted to catch Ireland's words, his eyes alert.

"**WE'VE BEEN ABLE TO RECONSTRUCT** what happened there," Ireland said.

"She spent that year in a rooming-house in preparation. Locating the right surgeons, locating the right place, making plans that would take years to execute. When she was ready, she was moved to the hospital."

"First, the pelvic condition that had crippled her was corrected. She could walk, but her gait was halting and unnatural. Thus her walk, an easily recognizable feature, as it is with anyone, was changed."

"She next underwent plastic surgery. She knew exactly what she wanted, and she spared no expense, and no suffering, to get it. She had money, a considerable amount. Dr. Pine had seen to that."

"Her features were altered; the shape of her nose and the general contours of her face were given a prognathic cast. No noticeable marks were left. Scars in the nose and behind the ears."

"This had been the simplest part of her arrangements."

"The next step—the difficult step, the fantastic clincher she had hit upon—was a delicate operation on the adrenal glands."

"Either, part of the glands were removed, or measures taken to induce chronic interstitial inflammation leading to gradual atrophy. The purpose was to effect the loss, or partial loss, of the internal secretion of the adrenals."

"Thus this surgery would induce the morbid anatomy of Addison's disease. And the most pronounced symptom of this disease is pigmentation of the skin, ranging in color from a light yellow to black."

"Concurrently, she treated herself with tonics, bismuth, and other medicines designed to alleviate the accompanying symptoms of Addison's disease. This course of treatment was prescribed for her, and we have found the physician's prescriptions and a quantity of the medicines in her room."

"The chance she took on that operation paid off. The color of her skin turned to brown. She was no longer a white woman but a colored woman, a mulatto—indistinguishable, except by medical examination, from a Negro."

"The Negro's coloring does not come from a special pigment but from an abundance of coloring matter in the Malpighian membrane of the skin; any dark-colored skin, therefore, is Negro."

"With her features changed, her walk—and even her race—and tinted glasses to conceal her eyes—"

"**PREPOSTEROUS!**" DR. PINE BARKED. "Preposterous!" He chewed his tongue angrily. "Are you trying to tell me that Kistry—that the leopard can change his spots, or the Ethiopian his—"

"Or the ptarmigan his feathers," Ireland said. "You said about the shrike that its disguise was not aggressive coloration, but circumstantial and psychological. With Kistry, a colored domestic, there was no possibility of suspicion, and with her—"

"I will never believe it!" the old man shouted. "I will never— Kistry! Bertha! To assume that I could be in daily contact with—"

"Yes," Ireland said, "I couldn't believe it either, until it was too late. I had suspected it for some time and I had part of the proof in my hands this morning when I talked to her; but because I still couldn't believe it, I waited for more information from the city; but my questions had frightened her, and that gave her a chance to blow. But the roads were guarded, and she—"

"Proof?" Dr. Pine said. "What proof, for such an incredible—"

"Documentary proof all the way," Ireland said, "including proof that she paid a domestic employment service five years ago to place her in your house. I still didn't believe it when I talked to Kistry and examined her eyes—the Negro has a yellowish cornea, but Addison's disease does not affect the eye coloring—and her eyes were not affected. I still didn't believe it when I took strands of her hair into the village today and had them put under microscopes at the hospital. The Negro's hair is flat, spirally twisted or crisped, no central duct, the coloring matter spread through the cortex and intermediate fibers. Kistry's hair showed no hint of any of these features."

"Further—her ears checked with the description of Bertha Arriven's ears. Further, as I also saw this morning, surgical scars behind her ears. I still didn't believe it was conclusive."

"But the rest of the evidence didn't leave any chance of doubt. I got Kistry's fingerprints this morning when I talked to her, and a set of Bertha Arriven's prints came up this afternoon from the sanitarium. I compared them, and they checked."

"It was my unbelief that let her get out of the house, but it was the Sheriff's—"

"It's fantastic!" Dr. Pine insisted. "Kistry—she's been with me five years—the family have been home for over a year. Why did she wait until—"

"She had a reason for that. The pathological condition that she had created to change the pigmentation of

her skin is serious. It is usually fatal. With careful treatment, the victim has six years or a little more of life—that's all.

"This is her sixth year since the operation. She meant to time her vengeance with her own death.

"There's a possibility now that the Sheriff won't take her alive."

Charles said: "Good God, I can't believe it. Kistry—"

"As well as I knew Bertha," Hebe said, "I— But she was Bertha's size, and her walk was—was peculiar. I remember she said once it was rheumatism. And there was her drinking, and the way she learned ornithology so quickly. And it does seem now there were one or two times, when she did something—that seemed familiar—but I'm imagining that. Oh, it seems impossible."

"Look," Hatch said, "if the police are down in the woods after her, what's the chances of her making a try to get back to the house tonight?"

"I don't know," Ireland said. "That's one reason I asked the Sheriff to keep still about it until it was over."

Hebe said: "But—mercy—"

"Stay indoors," Ireland said, "and stay together."

He left the room. Behind him he heard their voices raised in a storm of exclamation, and Dr. Pine said harshly over it: "Get out, get out, all of you. Get to hell out and stay out!" And Ireland heard Louise running after him and stopped to face her.

She whispered: "Sam, I talked to Dad, and I—I know what I didn't know last night. I—I just wanted to—to tell you. . . . You did let her get away, didn't you? Deliberately? Because you couldn't stand to—"

"No," Ireland said, "a cop can't do those things."

Hatch came up and Ireland left her with him.

In his room, Ireland went to the closet and opened the door. Kistry was in the closet, sitting on a folding chair. She said, "Mr. Ireland, I'm so scared."

"Are you all right? Do you want anything?"

"I've run clear out of whisky," Kistry said plaintively.

"I'll bring up some more," Ireland said. "Do you want a sandwich?"

"I aint terribly hungry. Do you reckon you could get me just a little chicken and cake? And some of the Doctor's Camembert? And maybe a few of them real good dill pickles. Do I have to stay in here much longer? I'm getting awful achy. And it's so scary, doing all this thing."

"Not much longer," Ireland said. "Everything's all right." He closed the door.

Kistry's muffled voice called out: "You won't forget the whisky, now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HELEN said: "We've been in to see Dr. Pine, and he told me. The poor man looks like death. Is it true, Sam? I can't believe it." "Have to believe it," Ireland said. "Proof." "It's the most astounding thing I've ever—"
To think that Kistry . . . living with us all this time, writing those letters, stealing those birds, creeping around blowing that little whistle—and—that night in the woods, with Mrs. Bregan—she only needed to have that pick hidden some place down there, and pick it up in the dark, and— Have they found it yet?"

"Not yet. It'll turn up."

"It's just unbelievable. That she could change herself—into a colored woman—and be right here with us—it gives me the shivers to think about it. It's like something out of some—some crazy dream. I remember once when I was little, I dreamed my Uncle John had come to our house and was going around cutting off all our heads, and putting them all in a line on the floor, and I was trying to hide—" She shuddered, and laughed at her-

self. "It still scares me when I think of it. Oh, there's May calling. She's eating her supper. I'm making her eat alone because she got sassy with Dr. Pine. He—he broke down. It was pathetic. And May told him he was silly. He's going to be lost without Kistry; and for it to be like this—I'm afraid he—" She opened the door of the nursery kitchen and said, "What do you want?" in a tone of severe reproof.

May said: "Is that Sam out there?"

"You just finish your supper, young lady."

"I want to see him."

"When you're through."

"I'm all through."

"Oh, nonsense," Helen said, and closed the door.

"What are you looking at, Sam? You've done nothing but peek out of that window. Is that what you came in for?"

Ireland grinned sleepily and left the window. The girl was very pretty, with pink excitement in her cheeks and the wanton smile playing now about her mouth, and he thought of saying this and that, and thought better of skipping it. He was weary, and his nerves were stretched and he was afraid to take his eyes off the hollow stump behind the garage, although he was quite assured that everything was okay.

IT WAS THE NEED FOR MINUTE, painstaking, intense care now that was difficult. But the thinking was over. The thinking was done. But he thought, and when he thought, an unpleasant knot grew in his stomach. Hell of a stomach for a cop!

May called out from her room: "Hello, Sam!"

Ireland said: "Hi!"

"Now don't encourage her to disobey," Helen said.

"I told her she could see you after her meal."

Ireland stood at her shoulder and said: "I'd like to kiss you, Peabody." He was very grave.

Peabody did not answer. He put his arms around her and kissed her on the mouth. She closed her eyes. Her back was straight and slim and her body was pliant in his arms. She cupped his chin in her hands and opened her eyes.

She said softly: "Thanks, Irish."

"Don't be a fool," Ireland said.

May pulled open her door and said: "What are you doing?"

Ireland went on out, and May called after him: "Good night!" He answered, "Good night," and she called more loudly, "Sweet dreams!" as he closed the door. . . .

Isabella was in a large room on the middle floor of the barn wing, with Miami in attendance. The blinds were drawn, and it was evening. The room was in darkness.

Miami said in a round whisper: "Come on in, Mr. Ireland. She aint sleeping anyways."

"Sam—" Isabella said, from some place deep in the room. He found his way over to her bed. He saw the pale oval of her face and the pale gold of her hair. She said: "My head hurts so." She began to whimper and said: "Doesn't anyone care?"

"Well," Ireland said, "I am sorry."

"But my head hurts so. As if a nail is being driven into it. I can't stand it, Sam, I can't stand it."

He listened to her, and remembered that he had gone into the nursery to get his gun from Peabody, and had forgotten it. Isabella's bereavement was very real, and he would have liked to comfort her if he could, but he had come to develop a cop's active resentment of hystericals, and he could do nothing that would not be false.

She said: "They came and told me Kistry—"

Ireland said: "Yes. That's right."

"I don't want things like this to happen to me," Isabella said. She laughed and whimpered as if it hurt her to laugh, and said bitterly: "Kistry. My God! Kistry!"

Ireland said: "They've got Erling under arrest in the village. He's charged with extortion. You'll get back the money you paid him last night."

She was not interested. She said presently: "Please go away. I don't want you here with me."

He turned away from the bed, and now that his eyes were used to the gloom of the room, he could see the door near the bed, the door that led to the next room of this suite, and he could see that it was not quite closed.

"Wait," Isabella said. Her eyes were large and dark in the dim light, and looked up at him with great sincerity. She said solemnly: "I despise all men. I thought it would be nice to know you. Now I detest you."

Miami followed him out of the room and said: "She's been like that all day. Aint no one can talk to her but Mr. Morey, and when she talk to him, she"—Miami dropped her voice and looked fearfully aside—"she call him Harold. It is the sorriest thing to listen to."

Hebe was writing in the library. She had switched on a reading lamp and she was working industriously, scribbling with a pencil. She started when Ireland appeared at her shoulder.

She said: "Oh—Mr. Ireland. Mr. Ireland, I want very much to speak to you."

"All right. Go ahead."

"I am going to pretend to forget the terrible accusations—the things you hinted of me. But I will tell you that since your news my heart has been racked as never before, and I have written a—few lines. I have called it the Last Sonnet. It is my answer, Mr. Ireland, to whatever—to whatever becomes of me now."

Sanctimony, Ireland thought; it should be a first-degree felony. Premeditated sanctimony—twenty years on the ducking stool. Next case.

"I came in to tell you not to stay in here by yourself," Ireland said. "Keep near the others. There's still a lunatic at large and I can't be every place in the house at once."

She didn't hear him. She said: "That first line is not at all right. I did try something about coming in heaven's angry sight. I think I like that better."

ON HIS WAY OUT, Ireland glanced up at the narrow gallery that ran along the book-lined walls some fifteen feet above the floor. Through an interstice in the gallery railing he saw Sheriff Burr's eyes looking back at him, over a jawful of tobacco.

He would have to swallow it, Ireland reflected.

Charles and George were in the dining-room, finishing a silent meal. George was smoking his pipe and looking at the beamed ceiling, and Charles was drinking coffee, his eyes on a magazine open at his plate. He glanced up when Ireland passed, but said nothing. His eyes were a little bloodshot, and there was a ruddy tinge to his gray face; and Ireland judged he had been hoisting a few.

In Miami's kitchen, Hatch and Louise were frying bacon and eggs.

"A crackpot can do anything," Hatch was saying. "Why couldn't she get away with it? You don't expect a—how about a bacon-and-egg sandwich, Ireland? Here's a plate of 'em. Help yourself. Heard anything?"

"They haven't found her yet," Ireland said. "Getting dark now. She can't get far. They're watching the roads. Don't know what she will do." He gestured at Louise with his sandwich and said: "Keep an eye on her."

"I'll do that," Hatch promised.

Louise put her hands on the edge of the sink. Her slender fingers were brown against the white enamel, and she seemed to watch them for a moment, her head bent. She said: "Why do you say to protect us? We are all—as guilty. . . . Why should we—"

"You're going to get that out of your head, honey. That's a crock of hock. You haven't got any part in it." He said to Ireland in his gravel voice: "Look, chum, I'm

going to take her out of this joint. For keeps. Now. Right now!"

"That's a good idea," Ireland said, while Louise shook her head miserably and said: "No, no, no."

"But wait till morning," Ireland said, and took another sandwich and left the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



IT was dark now in the yard, and Ireland turned up his jacket collar to conceal the white of his shirt, and walked quietly around the garage, staying in its shadow. He passed into the woods beyond the garage and found the hollow stump. The bloody

pick was still there. He sat down behind a tree a few yards away and ate his sandwich.

The Northern Lights were faint this evening, a dim glow on the horizon. Clouds were rolling up from the east, obscuring the stars as they came out. The wind was rising and there was bad weather in the air. He finished his sandwich, and the darkness had thickened, and he could see the stump only by fixing his eyes on the place he knew it to be, and focusing his vision on its vague outline against the sky.

Time passed slowly. The clouds were black and rolling lower across the sky, and the lighted windows here and there in the house stood out sharply. He began to be afraid that he would not see any movement in this pitch darkness, and that with the rising wind he would not hear. Very slowly he crawled out from behind his tree and crept nearer to the stump.

Still he could not see it, and after another interval, possibly five minutes, possibly half an hour, he got to his feet, crouching, and moved quietly around the stump to put himself between it and the house—and a tiny flashlight snapped on almost in his face.

He stood still, and the light flicked off, and he moved aside.

It seemed impossible that he had not been seen. There was silence, except for the moaning wind, and he could see nothing more until, a few feet past him toward the stump, the light snapped on again, a little spray of illumination that bobbed back and forth, searching.

It settled on the stump and went out again.

Ireland stretched himself full length on the ground. Seconds passed. Another quick splash of the light, gone almost before it appeared, and he heard the rustle of quick steps in the dead leaves.

He kept his ear to the ground, listening, judging the position of the sound, and when it seemed the right time, he came to his feet and spread out his arms and reached quite deliberately into the darkness.

His right hand touched the cloth of a garment, grabbed and held, and he felt a woman's body in his arms. He heard the pick fall to the ground. The woman lay inert against him, not struggling in the least, and he supported her with one arm and with his other hand got out his pocket flash and switched it on.

It was Isabella. She had fainted.

From the house there was a sharp yell, like the shout of a man to a dog, and two quick shots, their reports deadened in the rush of the wind.

A moment later someone appeared at the kitchen door, a tall black shadow in the bright yellow oblong of the door, and yelled: "Ireland! Ireland!"

Ireland flashed his light, and the Sheriff came trotting out to him.

"Ayah," the Sheriff said. "It was the little crippled fellow."

His voice was keyed up.

"He was going for his wife, just the way you said. He had a hammer. We waited till the last minute, and

then by dad, he didn't want to stop, so Dana had to shoot him. He had a hammer instead of the pick. Here, I'll give you a hand."

The Sheriff's lanky form bent, and he got an arm under Isabella and helped to lift her.

Ireland said: "Is he dead?"

"Oh, no. Nope. Dana just knocked him off his feet."

"I want him to talk," Ireland said. They worked their way toward the house, feeling their way over the rough footing, Isabella supported between them. "I want to know what the hell Isabella had to do with it. I hadn't counted her in."

"Oh, she's in the clear," the Sheriff said. "He's a cute one, that little fellow is. He smelled a trap around that pick, and he sent this poor woman to get it. Told her he'd seen Kistry put a pick there, and the police weren't saying anything about it because they were going to let Kistry go free. You couldn't of held her back with a team from a-slipping out to get it then. She's clean out of her mind; Doc said so. Said she might do anything that come into her head—or got put there either, I expect. The little fellow thought if you was watching the stump, you'd only get her."

The Sheriff backed off to hold open the kitchen door, and they carried Isabella into the house.

"No," Ireland said, "he only wanted to be sure that if something slipped up, she'd be involved along with him. If he hanged, he wanted her to hang with him. That would make him as happy as anything else, in the event he was caught."

He put Isabella on the floor of the kitchen. Hatch and Louissi had gone, and the sink was full of dirty dishes. Louissi wouldn't like that.

"Ayah," the Sheriff said. "Maybe so. Well, he didn't. Dana being hid there by her room all evening where he could hear, he heard everything was said. He seen her sneak out when that colored woman went to sleep. But he figured you'd be waiting out there and handle her all right, so he came on down with me."

Ireland said: "I'll find Miami and send her down. Stay with her here a minute. . . . Where was he? In the library?"

"Ayah. His wife was setting in there writing poetry. She didn't know anything was going on until Dana fired and knocked him down. Ayah," the Sheriff said, casting about for a place to spit, and ready to favor the sink as soon as Ireland should leave, "she was still setting there writing poetry. Ayah. . . . Poetry!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FROM the notebook of Hector Pine, Ph.D.
Sunday:

FWe are all alone, within the inner chambers of our minds. Surely nothing is so hidden as your neighbor's thought. You know a man—well and good; you feel you know him well enough, you say, to read his mind by his face, and so you do discern his surface reactions. But his thoughts—his thoughts—remain as secret as a junco's nest.

That George has been infatuated with Isabella has been a matter of common knowledge to all of us—except Hebe—for many months; but that thoughts of murder worked in that quiet mind—a madness of murder—a flaming caldron of murder, fanned by hot winds of jealousy and desire and hopeless dreams!

It was a simple pattern, Ireland tells me, confused only by the extraneous matter of Bertha.

His reasoning, he explained, took as its springboard the premise that some one of us in the house had seized the opportunity, provided by Bertha's threatening letters, to commit murder that would be laid to her.

The physical obstacles in the way of the involvement of Bertha herself in these crimes were, he believed from the beginning, insurmountable.

So there was, first, a statement of Miami's that the individual who stole the ice-ax to attack Harold jumped from a chair like a woman—i.e., with the double sound of high heels striking the floor. In considering this, Ireland saw that George's lameness would contribute to a similar sound.

There was, second, a sequence early distinguishable in these crimes, that Ireland described as, first, the strange whistle heard by Harold, which he followed to the courtyard to near death. George learned there that the human skull, the brain-vault, is not so easily fractured, and he did not make the mistake of striking too lightly again. And, next, an equally strange bird-whistle heard by Hebe the following afternoon and again in the evening.

FROM THIS IT APPEARED that Hebe was marked as the next victim. Harold and Hebe!

It remained at this time, then, for Ireland to discover in one of us the need to destroy those two specific persons—and this motive was immediately at hand, in George's passion for Harold's wife.

Hebe's feeling concerning divorce were well known to us all. George could never hope to be released from her (there is the nature of a leech in Hebe; there is no woman on God's earth more clinging than a plain woman who writes bad poetry) save by death.

As for Isabella, naturally, she would never consider divorcing Harold for George. She was quite contented as she was.

George, therefore, became the central figure of this elementary pattern: George, a crippled, maladjusted, inhibited creature, Hebe's Lord Byron. Granted the love of a ravishing woman like Isabella—mad to have her only for himself, without any conception of how little he might mean to her, but only of how much she meant to him, murder would be small cost indeed, for the reward he envisioned.

With this conclusion, Ireland set his watch on Harold and Hebe, awaiting George's next move—and Laura was murdered!

Thus his original hypothesis was thrown into doubt.

There was the possibility now that Charles had murdered his wife—although Ireland preferred to believe the word of Louise that her father had not left the house that evening. There was, further, the incompatibility between this crime and the attempted murder of Harold, and no reasoning could resolve the two.

It might be argued that Charles, like George, could find motive for wanting Isabella's husband out of the way—from jealousy of Isabella. But what reason, then, to cause the death of his own wife—within a matter of hours after they had agreed on a divorce?

If it was to gain what money she would leave him, then it was unnecessary as well; for if he expected to possess Isabella, she would bring enough of money with her, in her own substantial fortune.

If, on the other hand, Isabella was not considered, but only the profit to come from Laura's death—what then of the attack on Harold?

It was far more reasonable, Ireland thought, to suspect that Erling might have killed Laura in order to collect, in a roundabout way through Charles, the modest inheritance.

Murders have been committed for less, as Ireland says.

This theory, too, explained the attack on Harold not as attempted murder, but as a warning from Erling to pay Erling's demands. Ireland had evidence that Harold had been growing lax in his payments to Erling; and according to Ireland, it is not uncommon for gangsters engaged in extortion to visit physical violence on their victims in an effort to coerce them into paying.

These suppositions, however, were hard to reconcile with Erling's background and character, regardless of how unprincipled he had become; and before another day had passed after Laura's murder, they were wholly blighted when Isabella went into the village (to get the cash for which she had sometime earlier wired her New York account, as Ireland suspected) and later in the evening met Erling and paid him the blackmail money he had been asking.

But before this transaction was concluded, and the feasibility of Erling as a suspect eliminated, Harold was murdered. And with this crime the final proof, in Ireland's mind, that he had been right the first time.

Having prepared himself with a key to Harold's door, George, who accompanied Isabella to the barn dance that evening to meet Erling, simply waited until she had left her room, left Harold sleeping—upon which he entered and murdered Harold as he lay asleep, returned Ike's pick to its hiding-place, and joined Isabella after she had got out the car.

THAT IT HAD BEEN GEORGE was now entirely obvious. He had been the only one who had known that Isabella would be leaving that evening, at that particular time—leaving Harold unguarded. The only one, that is, except Erling and Isabella herself.

But Erling had been in the village; and as for Isabella, she could not have murdered Laura; Ireland had been with her in the house at about the time of Laura's murder a mile away, in the woods and in darkness—during the exact time of the murder, if the figure Isabella had seen on the hill had been George returning from the deed—and it was certain that the same person had been responsible for all that had occurred, inasmuch as the mounted shrikes which had been stolen from my study were used in all cases, and the same weapon used in both murders.

There was still the puzzle of Laura's murder; and the explanation for this, Ireland found in the decision that she had been killed by mistake.

At the time of her death she was wearing Hebe's raincoat—and George, furthermore, was the only one of us who had not seen Hebe put the coat on her. Also, he had been with us in the afternoon, had gathered the impression that Hebe was going with us to the woods in the evening to locate the owl, and was not aware that Hebe later changed her mind about accompanying us, and that Laura took her place.

And so he had followed us into the woods, and in the dusk mistook Laura for his wife, deceived by the enveloping raincoat. And he had, very likely, remained ignorant of his error until he got back to the house.

The pattern now, while complete so far as Ireland himself was concerned, was built on nothing but theory. It was possible to show that George could have done these things: left the dead shrike at my door, stolen the mounted birds, attacked and later murdered Harold, and murdered Laura; and it was possible to explain them soundly. But on this alone courts will not convict.

Here it was the shrike after all, Ireland tells me, that provided him with the key he needed: The relentless fury of the shrike in attack, and the observation that I passed on to him of a shrike chasing a small bird through a picket fence and stunning itself against the pickets.

If Laura had in fact been murdered for Hebe, if the luring bird-calls had indeed been meant for Hebe, if Ireland was correct and George was guilty, then Hebe was still marked for death.

But George might wait, wait for weeks or months—or might kill at any moment; and Ireland faced the necessity of himself choosing the time for this last attempt. So was carefully staged the fantastic "discovery" of Kistry as Bertha—the tale of her flight to the woods; the warning of the danger of her return during the night.

That George was as much convinced as any of us, I am sure; but he faced a puzzling situation: He knew well that Bertha, or Kistry, was not responsible for the murders, for he had committed them himself. But he was more than partly convinced that Ireland was telling the truth.

Believing this, he could only believe that Kistry had come to the house intending revenge, that with the writing of the threatening letters after the return of the family, her resolution had failed her, that at her discovery now, following the execution of crimes so contrived that they would surely be blamed upon her, her infirm mind had broken in terror and she had fled.

If true, then this moment gave him an opportunity too inviting to neglect, for the final death to complete his program.

It would be the work of only a minute to butcher Hebe. Kistry (or Bertha) would be apprehended by morning—he had to take the chance that she might be caught, down in the woods, before or at the very moment of his deed, but that was unlikely in the darkness of last night; and there was the obverse possibility that she might even be found dead and his protection would be complete.

That she would deny the murders if captured was inevitable, but under the circumstances her denials would mean nothing.

This, if Ireland's news about Kistry was true. If untrue—if a trap—he made provision for that also, with the final tactic of his maneuver, designed to implicate Isabella if his plans should go awry.

If all went well, he should dispose of the pick that Isabella would bring to the house by merely presenting it to Ireland as his discovery of further evidence against Kistry.

He was bold, as a shrike is bold. Ireland knew this from the daring evidence in the enactment of the other crimes: He was an opportunist, as is the shrike—ready to strike the instant his prey comes within range—as Ireland knew from the circumstances of Harold's murder.

SO DID HE HURL HIMSELF into the waiting pickets.

It is yet hard for me to realize that Bertha has had no remote part in these horrors, which have so surely wrought vengeance for her. That the shrikes, the ice-ax, the pick, were not of her choosing but of George's to put to a last violent use her wretched affliction.

That Bertha, in fact, is dead.

She died two months ago, Ireland has learned. She had lived in a wheel-chair since the accident, eight years ago. Her mind—who can say what by then her mind had become?

It is only probable that she read in the newspapers last year of Charles and Harold and Hebe returning to New York, and old memories were excited, old hates, dim—dim in her mind; and from the helplessness of her chair the series of letters was written—ending with her death.

The authorities are preparing to act in her case against Charles and Hebe. I don't know what the outcome will be. I care not a damn.

Thank God, Louise is out of it. She left with Hatch an hour ago. She believed Ireland's story of Bertha and Kistry thoroughly; that it proved to be false has made it easier for her, at least.

And so arrives the birth-date of my seventy-first year.

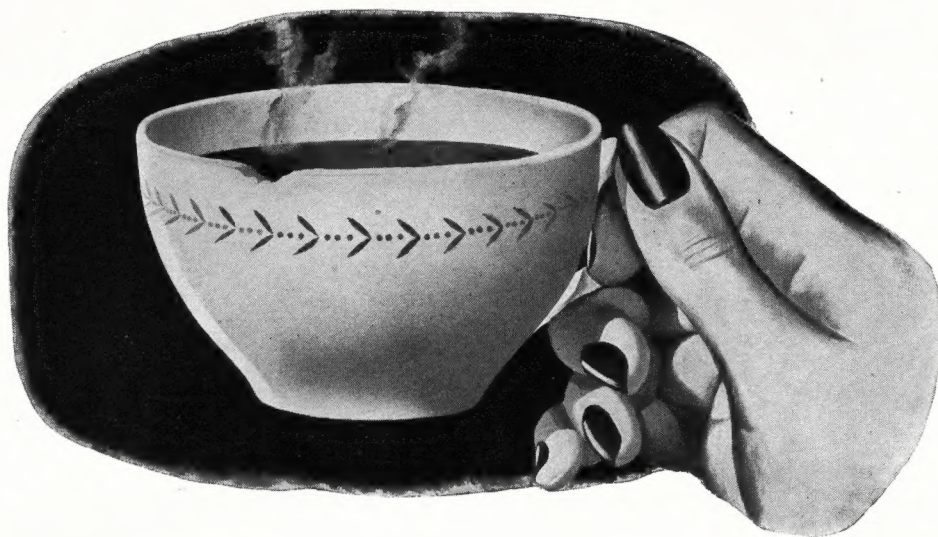
A storm has broken today; rain streams down the window as I write; but I see it slackening now, and I shall go afeld this afternoon.

Alone. To fill my cup of this day's observance. Alone.

That damned Kistry was drunk last night and sick today; she could not go with me if she would.

I shall be alone, and the day will be old and cold, and the rain will be dripping from the trees. But the robins will be calling, and there is no more noble music than the cry of robins after rain—it is the commonplace cry of our commonplace souls for reborn hope. I shall listen.

THE END.



The chipped teacup of the PATRIOTIC Mrs. Jones

No matter who the guest—Mrs. Jones brings out her chipped teacup with no embarrassment. On the contrary, with a thrill of pride.

Not very pretty, that chip. But it bears witness to the fact that Mrs. Jones has her nation's welfare at heart.

Mrs. Jones has given up all unnecessary spending for the duration. By doing *without*—she is helping to fight inflation.

Maybe she doesn't know all the complicated theories about inflation. But she does know that her government has asked her *not to spend*.

So Mrs. Jones is making all the old things do . . . not only that teacup. She's wearing her clothes for another year—and another. She's not competing with her neighbors for merchandise of any sort.

And the dollars she's not spending now are safely put away (and earning interest) for the peacetime years ahead. *Then* those dollars will buy things that can't be had for any price today.

If we all are like Mrs. Jones, there will be no inflation with skyrocket prices. If

we all are like her, dangerous Black Markets cannot exist.

A chipped teacup stands for all that . . . for a *sound, secure* U. S. A.

7 RULES FOR PATRIOTIC AMERICANS TO REMEMBER EVERY DAY

1. Buy only what you *absolutely need*. Make the article you have last longer by proper care. Avoid waste.
2. Pay no more than ceiling prices. Buy rationed goods only by exchanging stamps. (Rationing and ceiling prices are for *your protection*.)
3. Pay willingly any taxes that your country needs. (They are the cheapest way of paying for the war.)
4. Pay off your old debts—avoid making new ones.
5. Don't ask more money for the goods you sell or for the work you do. Higher prices come out of everybody's pocket—including *yours*.
6. Establish and maintain a savings account; maintain adequate life insurance.
7. Buy all the War Bonds you can—and hold 'em!

**HELP
US
KEEP**

PRICES DOWN

Use it up . . . Wear it out . . . Make it do . . . Or do without

BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN

TEN SHORT STORIES

including:

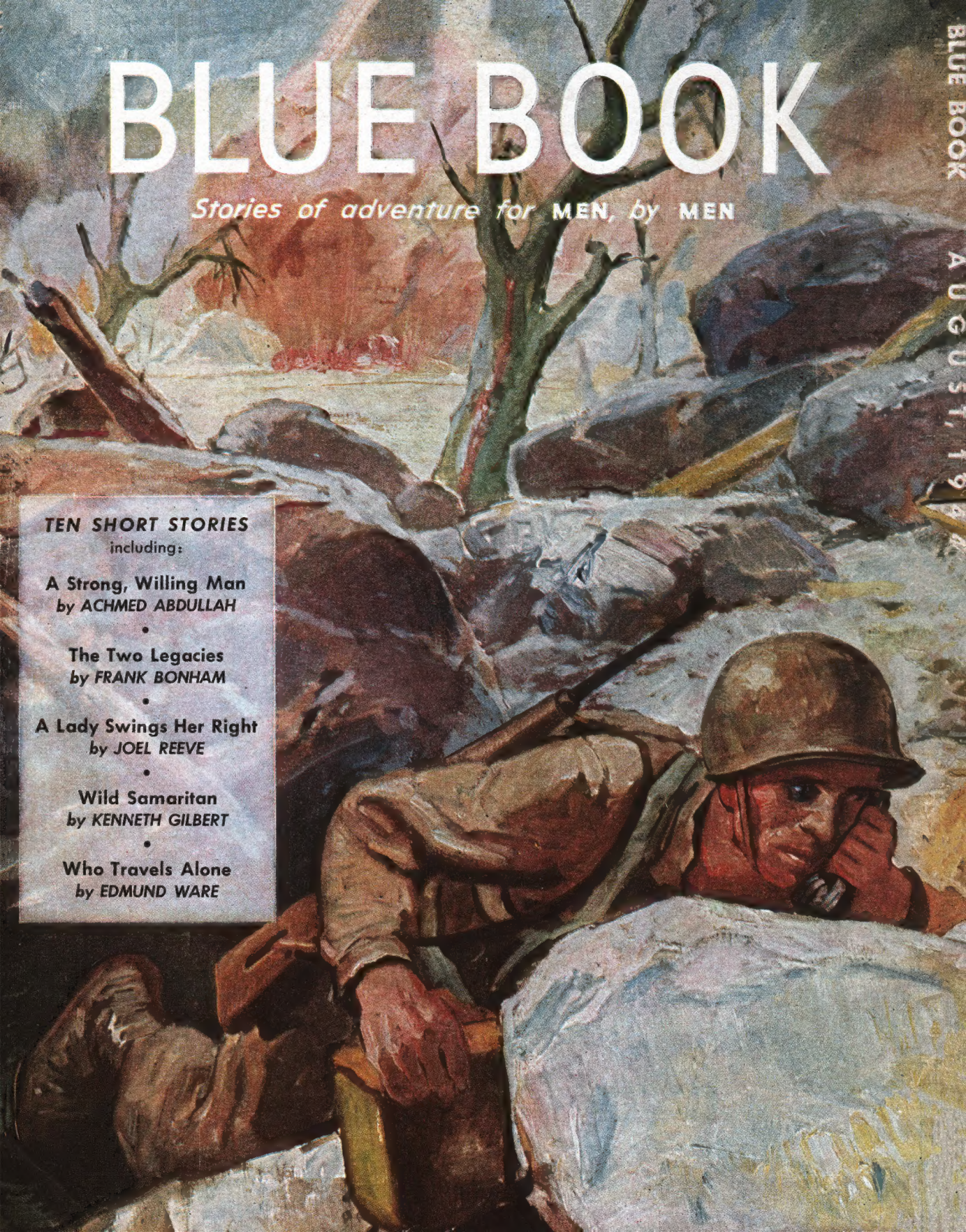
A Strong, Willing Man
by **ACHMED ABDULLAH**

The Two Legacies
by **FRANK BONHAM**

A Lady Swings Her Right
by **JOEL REEVE**

Wild Samaritan
by **KENNETH GILBERT**

Who Travels Alone
by **EDMUND WARE**



BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN

BLUE BOOK

AUGUST, 1944

AUGUST

25 CENTS

BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN

TEN SHORT STORIES

including:

A Strong, Willing Man
by AHMED ABDULLAH

The Two Legacies
by FRANK BONHAM

A Lady Swings Her Right
by JOEL REEVE

Wild Samaritan
by KENNETH GILBERT

Who Travels Alone
by EDMUND WARE

FORWARD OBSERVER

Painted by Herbert Morton Skoops

SHRIKE

A complete book-length novel
by WILLIAM BRANDON

Flight from Teheran
by WILLIAM MAKIN

Wolf Blood
by JAMES HOPPER

The Fabian Sword
by H. BEDFORD-JONES

Field Service Man
A novelette
by DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

